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THE POETRY OF SIEGFRIED SASSOON

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## Chapter One

### EARLY POEMS

Siegfried Sassoon was born in 1886, the second of three sons of Alfred Ezra Sassoon and Theresa Georgina Thorneycroft. The Sassoons were the descendants of a long line of Persian-Jewish merchants and bankers established in Toledo and Baghdad in the Middle Ages. This family came to be known in ~~contemporary~~<sup>modern</sup> times as 'the Rothschilds of the East' through their commercial transactions mainly carried out in the Near East. The religious orthodoxy of Siegfried Sassoon's more remote relations and the ostrangement of his father from the family were perhaps the reasons for his hardly knowing them; although, as a boy, he heard rumours of Great-Uncles who entertained the Shah of Persia or were friends of the Prince of Wales. His nearest relative among the English Sassoons was Aunt Rachel, editor of The Sunday Times and of The Observer. However, with her invalid husband and her austere fashionable house in Mayfair, described in The Old Century as "chilly", "sombre" and "Oppressive" (1), Aunt Rachel was almost as remote as any of Sassoon's paternal relations.

The Thorneycroft family was more familiar to the young Siegfried. Descendants from another old family, his nearest relatives ~~pursued such crafts as~~<sup>engaged in</sup> ship-building and sculpture, yet their traditions were firmly rooted in the English countryside. It was in this tradition and the atmosphere of Edwardian, middle-class complacency that Siegfried grew up, sheltered from hardship and emotionally dependent on his artistic mother.

His parents' marriage was not a happy one; he writes in

The Old Century his fourth prose work:

Had I been less fanciful and writing my own story, I should have begun as follows. 'Once upon a time there was a boy who was born in September 1886 at a house in Kent where he has lived ever since. He had two brothers who were born in 1884 and 1887, but we all behaved as if we were the same age. After 1891 we did not see our father very often. Our mother was unhappy because he had gone away to live in London and would not speak to her any more. (2)

Bouts of illness in childhood heightened Sassoon's aesthetic response to his surroundings until he believed, above all else, that he had the gifts of a poet. In this belief and its consequent ambition he was supported by his mother who "had a strong maternal feeling that I was destined to become a great poet." (3)

In The Old Century, Sassoon describes her gentle encouragement of his youthful aspiration and the development of his juvenile poems:

My own poetical works... were becoming noticeably aloof from ordinary affairs. While remaining an optimist outwardly, I was a most melancholy person when putting myself on paper. Eternity and the Tomb were among my favourite themes, and from the accessories of death I drew my liveliest inspirations. Apart from Posterity, the audience I addressed was my mother, and I didn't want to disappoint her by being insipid and unimaginative. (4)

Home was a haven for Sassoon as a child, where he grew up able to indulge his poetic sensibilities. Schooling at Marlborough followed, and then Cambridge which he left without *talking*

a degree, finding the academic discipline of Law and then History arduous and unrelated to his over-riding interest in poetry.

It was during his stay at university that Sassoon first sought a printer. His earliest publications, printed in various copies of the magazine Cricket, were mainly parodies of famous poems of which the themes were replaced by topical cricketing issues such as the extra inch added to the stumps in 1903, A schoolboy parody of Kingsley's Sands of Dee that was printed in Seven More Years, begins:

O batsman go and stop the rot. (5)

At Cambridge he wrote several facetious pieces of doggerel on various subjects, including "lovers alliteratively involved in a motor accident," (6) for inclusion in the Cambridge magazine, Granta.

The first publication of Sassoon's poems was in the form of a private printing by the Athenaeum Press in 1906 which inaugurated a series of similar printings during the years that followed. In 1908, Orpheus in Dilocryum, An Episode was printed. It is described in The World of Youth as "an unactable one act play which had never quite made up its mind whether to be satirical or serious." (7) This was followed in 1909 by Sonnets and Verses, a more ambitious volume containing thirty-four poems. Three of the thirty-eight copies ~~printed~~, were handsomely printed on hand-made paper which later caused them to be preserved as the only record of this printing when Sassoon destroyed the rest in a fit of despair.

Of the poems Sassoon decided to preserve in later publications and in his Collected Poems, the earliest sonnet is Villon from Sonnets and Verses. This poem had already been printed in T.W.H. Crosland's magazine The Academy in May, 1909 (modestly signed 'S.S.'). Sassoon's meetings with the sly old reactionary, Crosland, were his first encounters with the literary world (for he had not pursued his family's acquaintance with Edmund Gosse (8)) and are ~~withily~~ amusingly recounted in The World of Youth. (9) Crosland,

as dyed in the wool concerning poetry as women's suffrage, praised Sassoon's early poems for their "melodious refinement." Sassoon quotes a typical verse as an autobiographical gloss:

Blind from the goblin-haunted glooms of night,  
Passion with poisonous blossoms in her hair;  
Then, crowned with rotted chaplets, wan Despair;  
And Folly, from base deeds in headlong flight... (10)

The poem Villon was subsequently published by the author in Sonnets, 1909; Twelve Sonnets, 1911; and The Old Huntsman, 1917. It is the sole survivor from among the eighteen sonnets of Sonnets and Verses, which rather suggests its superiority to them. Villon, the poet, is ejected from prison in a condition described by the author as "rather more down and out than usual." (11) He is rescued and cherished by one who does not feel the general disgust at the wretched man's appearance. The incident presumably relates to Villon's banishment (for ten years) after torture by the Parlement, 1463, at which point he disappears from history. The theme of Sassoon's poem resembles that of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Villon is even rejected by Lazarus who

In noisome rags arrayed and leprous shame,  
Beside me set had seemed full sweet and fair,  
And looked on me with loathing. (12)

The voice of Villon, the first person of the poem, is evidently issuing from the ~~"hostel"~~ "hostel" to which he had been taken. The dignity and modulation of the lines and the economy of the description of Villon's two <sup>a</sup> consecutive states (after his ejection from the <sup>k</sup> dungeon) form the two parts of the sonnet and support the inference that, by the agency of the anonymous "Samaritan", his future is to be ~~regenerative and hopeful~~:

) The mortal stain of my reputed sin,

My state despised, and my defiled woods,  
He hath put by as though they had not been.

Of the other two survivors of Sonnets and Verses, the poem Arcady Unheeding is one of the poems singled out for praise by Edward Marsh, the editor of the series of anthologies entitled Georgian Poetry. In 1913, in a letter to Sassoon criticising his poems, (13) Marsh gave some sound advice:

It seems a necessity now to write either with one's eye on an object or with one's mind at grips with a more or less definite idea. Quite a slight one will suffice. Take some examples from your work: "Morning Land" means that old English songs are like the dawn - Arcady Unheeding that country folk don't pay attention to the beauties of nature - and Dryads that the open country gets light earlier than the woods. (14)

Marsh's remark on Arcady Unheeding is really adequate comment; the poem is a simple idea stated in simple terms. Its weakness lies in the fact that the shepherds are an essential part of any concept of Arcadia.

One watches weather-signs of day,  
One of his maid most dear  
Dreams.

This pair is the aged rustic and the young swain who are as necessary to the pastoral scene as the birds, blossoms and the "wide worlds of blue beyond their windy lee." It is the observer who is out of place. The poem fails because it makes a false distinction between "country folk" who "don't pay any attention to the beauties of nature" and the fact that such people are an organic part of the idea of Arcadia.

Sassoon, in a fit of self-criticism, destroyed all the copies



of Sonnets and Verses except the three "which were nicely bound and printed on good paper." (15) However, most of the sonnets, with commendations, survived to be printed shortly after in Sonnets, 1909, and some appeared in Twelve Sonnets, 1911, from which two new poems were to appear in later editions. One survivor, Before Day, which has been praised by several critics, reads as a rather unsuccessful attempt by Sassoon to unify ~~with~~ the poet as solitary with his doubts about his power to express the significance of the countryside at dawn:

For I am lone, a dweller among men  
Hungered for what my heart shall never say.

Goblin Revel is a better poem, although no attempt is made to embrace such an exalted theme as is to be found in Before Day. Edward Marsh rightly considered it to be Sassoon's best sonnet. (16) The octave is built round the two related uses of the word "revel." The goblins' celebration is in the form of a "revel" or dance; they also "revel" in the proceedings. The first meaning of the word suggests the contorted movement of the goblins while the second meaning suggests their facial expressions and wicked delight in their own behaviour. The grotesqueness of the creatures is carefully built up by these separate but involved actions. With "flooring looks of sin" spreading over their features

.... With loutings they begin  
Their woven measure, widening from the door.

Marsh found the dance of the goblins "exactly like the dance of the grotesques in the Russian ballet, Oiseau de Feu." (16) The sestet of the sonnet describes the goblins at break of day, clambering back into the "dusky noon." The explicitness of Sassoon's description of their habitat tends to undermine the impression of a slyly or partly observed scene. ~~Everywhere there are references to farm dogs and~~  
Furthermore, archaisms such as "haply" and "shoon" are here

obtrusive since they are juxtaposed with homely and matter of fact observations:

...silent go their shoon  
On creakless stairs; but far away the dogs  
Bark at some lonely farm: and haply they  
Have clambered back into the dusky moon.

As there were no such observations in the first eight lines, archaisms such as "twirling antic" become part of the unreality of the scene. It may be that a reference to farm dogs was intended to intrude, much in the way that the daylight intrudes into the goblins' dancing, but the reason why

They pause, and hushed to whispers, steal away

is not explained.

Five more of the poems that Sassoon included in The Old Huntsman, the first <sup>edition</sup> ~~publication~~ of his poems <sup>published</sup> by Heineman, appeared in Poems, 1911, and Melodies, 1912. Of these, some - October being the most striking example - are almost meaningless, relying on Sassoon's characteristic mellifluity to create a mood akin to that of music. In many of his early poems, Sassoon intended to create the harmonies and emotional impact of music. This tended to leave poems overweighted with words and intellectually unstimulating.

The Heritage avoids this temptation; it is based on the ideas that without a concept of Death, any discussion of Life is reduced to a mere series of existential statements (suggested by "cold philosophies") and that mutability gives significance to living:

... and most in change the human heart can trace  
The miracle of life and human things.

Night-Piece is also worthy of attention. Well-handled structurally, this poem is a dream fantasy concerning the lesser creatures of myth and superstition - witches, dryads and a faun.

It is gently evocative and begins with a contrast between the "hooded witches" who are active in total darkness and the milder nature of the dryads and the faun who belong to the happier realms associated with night: moonlight and sleep. These are described in the remainder of the poem.

Most of the poems in Discoveries, 1915, and Morning Glory, 1916, are reprinted in The Old Huntsman. The thirteen poems of Discoveries display all the virtues and vices of Sassoon's early work. Today inflates the ideas of The Heritage and comments more fully on the joys of the present, or "change." The poem expresses the continuity of night and day in terms of simple human relationships:

This is 'Today, a child in white and blue  
Running to meet me out of night who stilled  
The ghost of Yester-even; this is fair Morn  
The mother of To-morrow.

This permanently continuing change and renewal is contrasted, by implication, with the clouds whose is a "drifting state." They are "thoughts" that can discern the possibility of loss contained in the sweet appreciation of the surroundings, the fragility of

This bubble of vistaed memory and sense  
Blown by my joy aloft...

the end of  
"Tomorrow might bring death" but unlike ~~in~~ The Heritage, this is not the culmination of the poem. In an upsurge of joy, the poet wishes to embrace the shift and change of the universe which, in a Shelleyan sense, is the significance of Life:

Let me stand within  
The circle of your transience, that my voice  
May thrill the lonely silences with song.

Wonderment, following Today in Discoveries, modifies the

impression of an ecstatic, rather uncontrollable response to aspects of nature. The clouds and the breeze remain, but the first person has become the third; the point of the poem is thus distanced, less ecstatic. The moment of ecstasy in Today corresponds to a similar feeling in Wonderment; however

Like a flush of wings  
The moment passed: he stood  
Dazzled with blossoms in the swaying wood;  
Then he remembered how through all swift things,  
This mortal scene stands built of memories.

Similar sentiments appear in Wisdom, although here they are more slightly handled. These are not great thoughts but a response, sincerely expressed, <sup>that</sup> ~~which~~ emphasises the solitariness of that response.

The world's my ship and I'm alone on deck!

Storm and Sunlight expresses Sassoon's response to the manifestations of weather contained in the title. As in Wisdom, Sassoon has put aside pagan figures in favour of an unspecified "God." The storm reduces humankind to "close huddling men" and reminds them of the "gaze of God." The countryside after the storm is apocalyptic, a revelation of the "night" of a beneficent deity and the "benediction" that men share with the whole of creation. These "huddling men" are exhorted to

Lift your blind faces to be filled with day,

which further

demonstrates Sassoon's anti-philosophical approach already examined in The Heritage. As in previously discussed poems, the appreciation of nature purely through the senses is linked with the solitariness of the poet. In the poem Alone, he has "listened" and "looked" but still yearns for the "food" and "light" of the heart. Although he admits to having "thought" he is conscious of the insufficiency of this process:

...Hear me say

'I've thought' - and darkness hides my day.

In Nimrod in September and Noah ~~we~~ catch glimpses of the direction in which Sassoon's poetry was to develop. In Nimrod in September, he handles archaisms - "a-bed", "jollity of horn and lusty cheer", "dwindling rout" - deliberately, and the scene assumes something of the texture of a hunting print. The joy and animal activity of "Young Nimrod" are contrasted with the "drowsy world"; his "huge clamour" reverberates in the "sultry brakes." Nimrod in September is brief, clear and to the point. In Noah, biblical subject-matter is treated lightly; Noah is the traditional jolly figure and his natural exuberance is ironically juxtaposed with what ought to be a great and solemn occasion:

Earth was saved; and Noah danced a jig.

In Morning Glory, four of the eleven poems belong to the war period, and are printed as such in The Old Huntsman. Of the other poems, the language and tone of Blind resembles that of Villon. The afflicted man

Starers and old and blind, a sight for pity,  
With feeble steps and fingers on the wall,  
Gropes with staff along the rumbling city.

Morning Glory, the title poem, is a rather stock nativity piece that occasionally resembles a bad carol:

Loud the happy children quire  
To the golden windowed morn.

The "tiny" Christ is adored by shepherds and "green-snoaked children." His torment is nonetheless entailed in his birth and he "sleeps below the crimson thorn."

A Child's Prayer, Dream-Forest and The Poplar and the Moon are slight pieces. Ancestors is more successful. Sassoon's ancestors, the Sephardic Persian-Jewish merchants, are seen here as possessed with the stature and dignity of elders, bartering "monstrous wealth with speech subdued"; but their transactions are tinged with a pervading sadness. They are "Foregathered in some chancellery of death"; their eyes are "lustreless" with "equiescent lids". The song of mourning links them with the Sultan, who, in the second stanza, hears this

frail music wind along the slopes

Put forth and fade across the whispering sea.

The poem is subtly wrought; the Sultan and the ancestors are not only linked by the song but also by the gardens which contain "night's/Hushed sweep of wind" for the merchants, and for the Sultan the "sweet influence" of "remembered flowers." The scene is sensuously evoked in carefully modulated language, yet there is a perpetual sense of disparity between the "jewelled, merchant ancestors," whose business is undertaken in the "chancellery of death", and the Sultan in his "glimmering palace." He is a "shadow at the window, turbaned, vast," whose function resides in his position, who has the leisure to "lean" and "ponder", whose listening is not confined, as is the merchants' to "pauses in their conference."

\* \* \*

In 1913, Sassoon wrote a burlesque of Macaulay's long poem, The Everlasting Mercy. Written in briskly moving octosyllabic couplets, The Everlasting Mercy tells the story, in his own words, of a brutal drunken poacher whose reform is ultimately accomplished by a Quaker woman. Setting out to amuse himself by "scribbling a few pages of parody" (17), Sassoon found that he became considerably

involved with the subject:

Having rapidly resolved to impersonate a Sussex farm-hand awaiting a trial for accidental homicide of the barman of the village ale-house, I began his story in the crudest imitation of Marcefield's manner... After the first fifty lines or so I dropped the pretence that I was improvising an exuberant skit. While continuing to burlesque Marcefield for all that I was worth, I was really feeling what I wrote. (17)

Entitled The Daffodil Murderer, the result cannot properly be considered as anything but a parody; nonetheless it is a definite success. Its virtues lie in the "new pair of poetic legs" that Marcefield "graciously" (18) presented to the young poet. Sassoon had at last written something modern even though it was derivative.

On February 10th, 1914, Sassoon found himself "the anonymous author of a sixpenny pamphlet in a cheerful orange coloured wrapper" (19), prefaced facetiously by "William Butler" and published by "John Richmond, Ltd.," both pseudonyms of Grosland who seemed anxious to promote the poem merely as a burlesque on Marcefield. The only contemporary review, appearing in The Athenaeum, stated that

The only conclusion we obtain from its perusal is that it is easy to write worse than Mr. Marcefield. (20)

It is apparent that enmity existed between Grosland and The Athenaeum and that Grosland had let it be known that the authorship of the poem was his own (it was assigned to "Saul Kain"). Consequently the reviewer in The Athenaeum had, as Sassoon put it, "welcomed the opportunity of landing him one on the jaw." (21)

The Daffodil Murderer is undoubtedly a good piece of work. It has been praised by various critics, including Michael Thorpe (22), who has described it as "Sassoon's most promising Pre-war poem." (22)

In order to substantiate this claim one needs to discern qualities in the work that are not Masofield's. More promising in Sassoon's early work is his ability to accomplish the task he had undertaken. The more successful of his early poems share with The Daffodil Murderer qualities of arrangement and completion that were to be fully utilised in his poetic maturity.

The impact of The Everlasting Mercy lies in the force and directness of the verse which impels the story; to its public it seemed realistic and daring. The passages in which Poacher Kane runs naked through the town and rings the fire bell are exhilarating; his grudge against the Squirearchy is telling. It is in the contrast between the two Kanes described in the work, the demonic poacher and the reformed God-fearing man, that the weakness of the poem lies; the latter is insufficiently entailed in the former. This is not to say that like Blake's Milton, Masofield is "of the Devil's party without knowing it." (23) Narrating his own tale, the reformed Kane inserts short passages of neatly-mouthed moralising:

O young men, pray to be kept whole  
From bringing down a weaker soul.  
Your minute's joy so meet in doin'  
May be the woman's door to ruin... (24)

Such passages are made to suffice for the seeds of reform that should be present in the character of the old, bad Kane, who is shamed from time to time only by arguments more glib than his own. Kane has a genuine grievance which is counted for little in the total poem. When he accepts the genuine and merciful doctrines of the Quaker, one feels that he has also sold out to the Squire and the Preacher.

The name of "Albert Meddle" (Sassoon's hero) does not suggest the archetypal reformed wrongdoer conjured up by the name "Saul Kane." Rotting in jail, Meddle contemplates his fate; his change of heart is not so <sup>much</sup> a volte face as an improving



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ability to understand his former weaknesses. In this way Albert Moddle is perhaps more convincing as a man than Saul Kano; his evil is never total and the possibility of repentance is always present. When he does repent, his grievances are not forgotten:

I've done a crazy deed of shame  
And never thought to 'scape the blame;  
But shifty lawyer robs his lord,  
Then takes a ship and bolts abroad;  
Cheating broker makes his pile,  
And then sets up to live in style. (25)

Kano is concerned only with himself; Moddle spares pity for his wife:

Like a good gal she'll make small fuss:  
I'll hug her once and gi''er a buss;  
Because her man she mun be leaving,  
Her man as isn't worth the grieving.

Albert Moddle's remorse and changed attitude <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~ more convincing than Saul Kano's spectacular conversion. It was probably this comparison that lead Professor de Sola Pinto to claim that

The Daffodil Murderer is not only a remarkably clever imitation of Maschfield's style, but a moving and original poem, superior in some ways to Maschfield's. It is significant, too, because it shows that even before the war Sassoon had a sense of the hollowness of the gentlemanly paradise in which he spent his youth, and a deep ~~sympathy~~ sympathy for the common man who was excluded from that paradise. (26)

Saul Kano's final conversion, which occurs after a bout of drinking, has the unconvincing ring of Alec D'Urbervilles in Toss of the D'Urbervilles. In Hardy's novel, D'Urberville's

conversion is as easily wrecked, ~~by temptation,~~ as it was undertaken. By analogy, Kane's also loses conviction. Although Sassoon does not claim that his own "yokel was undeviatingly true to life," (17) he does claim that the poem bears relation to reality:

my narrative did at any rate express that rural  
Sussex which I had absorbed through following the  
Southdown Hounds and associating with supporters  
of the hunt. (27)

The hunt provided Sassoon with another topic for a monologue; that of an ageing huntsman who, having grown old and squandered his gratuity, has fallen on hard times. The poem deals with the old man's attempts to reconcile the easy-going hedonism of his former life and profession, retained tenaciously and in the face of professional advice, with the Christian ethic he is trying to embrace. His thoughts go back to "The man I was when hunting with the Squire" before he made the disastrous "seven years bargain for the Golden Fleece." This bargain ruined him and replaced his "wife of thirty years who served me well" with a "beldam clattering in the kitchen." He sits and meditates while waiting for this "old harridan" to bring the lamp, in an atmosphere conducive to melancholy. He desires the company of the Squire, who, if he were able, would

... come

For sure, and sit and talk and suck his brier...

This desired visitor is in fact replaced by the person who will drop in "once in a way." The contrasting circumstances of the huntsman introduce a lengthy sequence in which the old man ponders on life and expresses his notions of religion confusedly, in terms of the hunt. When in his prime he never took heed of the scriptures:

Religion beats me. I'm amazed at folk

Drinking the gospels in and never scratching  
Their heads for questions...

... I'd no chance  
When young and gay to get the hang of all  
This Hell and Heaven: and when clergy hoick  
And holloo from their pulpits, I'm asleep,  
However hard I listen.

He follows with his own private vision of Hell where all the foxes  
are non-starters, where there is "an iron-spiked fence round all  
the coverats" and "Hell was the coldest scenting land I've known."  
Conversely, good hunting country is his idea of Heaven; he dreams  
how happy he would be

If there were hounds in Heaven  
With God as master taking no subscription.

Similarly, he converts the religious hierarchy into familiar terms:

I've come to think of God as something like  
The figure of a man the old Duke was.

The huntsman's redemption rests in the degree of self-knowledge  
he attains by the rather dubious means of relating God and  
religion to his sporting life. He knows that he has not given up  
enough time to reflection:

... Now I know  
It's God that speaks to us when we're bewitched  
Smelling the hay in June...

He knows that he remained insular, only partly alive, for all  
his vigour in the chase:

... I never broke

Out of my blundering self into the world,  
But let it all go past me, like a man  
Half asleep in a land that's full of wars.

The Old Huntsman is a convincing poem on a subject near to Sassoon's heart. It was written well after the outbreak of war and indicates a new attitude in Sassoon who was perhaps breaking out of the fetters of nineteenth-century poeticism into a new awareness of the world and men.

#### Footnotes to Chapter One

- 1) The Old Century and Seven More Years (Faber & Faber, London, 1938) p. 81.
- 2) *ibid.* pp. 14-15.
- 3) *ibid.* p. 142.
- 4) *ibid.* p. 147.
- 5) *ibid.* p. 228.
- 6) *ibid.* p. 253.
- 7) The Weald of Youth (Faber & Faber, London, 1942) p. 15.
- 8) The eminent Victorian literary critic, Edmund Gosse, was an old friend of Sassoon's uncle, Hamo Thorneycroft, at whose suggestion Sassoon sent a copy of Orpheus in Dilioeryum to Gosse. Gosse praised this rather immature work in a letter to Sassoon and Sassoon visited him at the House of Lords some years later; but, as Sassoon put it, "Mr. Gosse was far too busy and famous to have time for giving more than fleeting encouragement to any but the most promising poets". (Weald of

Youth, p. 102.) Nonetheless, having read The Daffodil Murderer (see note 25), Edmund Gosse put Sassoon in touch with Edward Marsh who was to be of considerable use to Sassoon in his career as a poet. Marsh was editor of Georgian Poetry from its inauguration in 1912 until 1922.

- 9) see especially pp. 126-137 & 184-190.
- 10) Weald of Youth p. 14.
- 11) *ibid.* p. 14.
- 12) Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Sassoon's poems are taken from Collected Poems 1908-1956 (Faber & Faber, London, 1961)
- 13) see note 8.
- 14) Weald of Youth p. 138
- 15) ~~ibidxxxxx~~ inscription on fly-leaf of surviving copy.
- 16) Weald of Youth p.139.
- 17) *ibid.* p. 124.
- 18) *ibid.* p. 126.
- 19) *ibid.* p. 130.
- 20) *ibid.* p. 136.
- 21) *ibid.* p. 137.
- 22) Siegfried Sassoon: A Critical Study (O.U.P., Leiden & Oxford, 1966) p. 9.

- 23) The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Poetry and Prose of William Blake (Nonesuch, London, 1927) p. 182.
- 24) The Everlasting Mercy (Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1911) p.24.
- 25) The Daffodil Murderer (John Richmond, London, 1913) reprinted in Michael Thorpe's Siegfried Sassoon: A Critical Study p.275.  
All quotations from The Daffodil Murderer are taken from the latter edition.
- 26) Crisis in English Poetry (Hutchinson, London, 1935) p.143.
- 27) Weald of Youth p.125.

## Chapter Two

### WAR POEMS: 1915/1917

Whether one regards the outbreak of the First World War on August 3rd 1914 as the outcome of profound and inevitable forces or as the result of a number of unfortunate accidents, there seems little doubt about the enthusiasm of all participants. It would be a war of great battles nobly fought on alien territory in defence of one's own, in which victory, not only over one's adversary but over war itself could be achieved by Christmas, 1914. The British were particularly convinced of this. The war begun in defence of "little Belgium" would be a "war to end all wars." (1) After the rapid advance of the German army into France had been checked, the war itself settled down to four years of deadlock. The enthusiasm of the British for the war took less time to abate.

This early enthusiasm, known as "the spirit of 1914", was reflected by poets; indeed, in the history of English Literature, few poets have spoken against war. The tradition of war poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century depended on verse written by poets who, whether they approved of warfare or not, had little or no experience of war itself: Byron and Hardy had not fought at Waterloo nor Tennyson at the Crimea. Perhaps only the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, Shakespeare notable among them, had come near to any understanding of the sufferings of the common soldier and the pressures he had to endure.

Before the declaration of war in 1914, Kipling had composed many poems based on his impressions of the common soldier; yet,

When the war began, his concerns were not with individuals. Kipling's attitude to the outbreak of war is expressed in For All We Have and Are which was published in The Morning Post on September 2nd 1914. As early as 1902 he had prophesied the invasion of England in The Islanders:

Do ye wait for the spattered shrapnel ere ye learn  
how a gun is laid?

For the low, red glare to southward when the raided  
coast-towns burn? (2)

It is therefore hardly surprising that he does not predict a glib victory in For All We Have and Are,

But iron sacrifice  
Of body, will and soul. (3)

Kipling is at pains to distinguish between the homeland, in which reside the gentler virtues, and the dreadful enemy determined to destroy a civilisation near perfection:

Comfort, content, delight,  
The ages' slow-bought gain,  
They shrivelled in a night.

"The Hun is at the gate" and he is, for Kipling, a "crazed and driven foe." By no means the most outspoken in its revulsion of the "foe", For All We Have and Are was praised for its structure and sentiments. Kipling's poems are frequently fashioned as instruments to serve a deliberate purpose and his concern is to find a form to fit them. In this case the desired unity of form and sentiment is achieved. The poem is sober and sonorous in tone and ~~exaggerated~~ certain exaggerated techniques employed by other poets are avoided. (4)

J.I.M. Stewart said that Kipling's poem was "adequate to its grave



occasion." Other poems by representatives of the older generation of poets, appeared in journals and periodicals during the months subsequent to the declaration of war. Taken together, they provide overwhelming evidence of the failure of these poets to comprehend the nature of the European struggle that they were so eager to glorify; seen in retrospect, none of their poems was "adequate to its grave occasion." Although these poems are largely deplorable as literature, the sentiments expressed in them reflect the dominant, aggressive mood of the majority of the English people and provide a useful contrast to the development of attitudes expressed by the younger generation of poets who had to fight in the arduous conditions that were to come. Such poets of the older generation include Robert Bridges, Henry Newbolt, William Watson, Alfred Noyes, and John Drinkwater, all of whom published poems in newspapers to celebrate the outbreak of war. These may be said to represent the general attitude of their generation expressed in literature. Their poems are jingoistic and express values and opinions which now seem startling in their naïveté. Most look to God for sanction of the conflict, and naturally enough, He is on the right side. In The United Front, Alfred Noyes says:

Now, in God's name, we draw  
The sword.... (5)

while both Henry Newbolt and Robert Bridges respectively assert:

God defend the right! (6)

Kipling in his Hymn Before Battle, invokes "Jehovah of the thunders" (7). The enemy is informed by John Drinkwater:

You trade in death, you mock at life, you throw  
To God the tumult of your blasphemies..., (8)

while William Watson in a missive to The Troubler of the World, tells him:

We do not with God's name make wanton play,  
We are not on such easy terms with Heaven. (9)

In a pamphlet of poems selected from newspapers to represent the "free offering of English poets to the cause of National Relief", "wanton play" is not made with God's name no less than twenty-three times. (10)

It was not doubted that God ~~stood~~ for England and that England ~~stands~~ for Justice, Truth and Honour. Such attitudes were not confined to Tory patriots and the representatives of a privileged older generation. Members of a largely unestablished younger generation of poets, many of whom were to take part in the conflict, accepted them in a version only slightly modified to suit their ~~own~~ own requirements. It is therefore worthwhile to enunciate some of the most ~~the~~ important of these attitudes in order to assess the apparently amazing change of heart that overtook some of the young writers who endured the ordeals of the Somme and Passchendaele; a change of heart that seems to have overtaken Sassoon in particular. As in For All We Have and Are, the enemy is persistently equated with the barbarian; the Kaiser and Germany are variously described as "Caesar of the Night" (11), "Warlord" (12) and "Vampire of Europe" (13); civilised England, frequently personified as a noble creature, looks on aghast: "We willed it not!" They all agree that England would be the more successful in the fight; several poems contain exhortations to England like Maurice Hewlett's:

Fight since thou must; strike quick and fierce. (14)

The conflict, so "unwillingly" engaged, involves several paradoxes. For instance, the fighting is strictly in order to bring about peace and freedom. The concluding lines of Watson's To The Troubler of the World illustrate the idea of fighting for peace, this being the last

resort of a guiltless country against a "crazed and driven foe"?  
and their common equation in these poems of peace with victory:

'Our hands are pure; for peace, for peace we have  
striven';

And not by Earth shall he soon be forgiven  
Who lit the fire accurst that flames today.

Common also is the paradox that the man who is fondest of his life  
is best pleased to die in a good cause. Thus Robert Bridges in  
Wake up England, informs Britain:

Through Fire, Air and Water  
Thy trial must be;  
But they that love life best  
Die gladly for thee. (15)

England's "heritage" is frequently invoked to demonstrate her  
potential might. It is a significant measure of the unpreparedness  
of England that British poets should see the war in terms of the  
Armada and the Battle of Trafalgar. They depict England as a country  
mightily wronged, wreaking vengeance on a skulking and inferior foe  
and backed to the hilt by such heroes as "Hawke, Howard, Grenville,  
Frobisher, Drake". (16) The failure of the poets to foresee the  
*nature of the* war parallels the failure of the Generals to adjust their strategic  
theories to the conditions of trench warfare. Most of them thought  
that the offensive tactic would carry the day. In fact, the soldiers  
could move no ~~faster~~ factor than had the Romans conquering the  
Gauls. Horses and cavalry were useless on ground thick with mud and  
terrain broken up by artillery fire. On the other hand supplies and  
relief troops could be moved up to the front line by trains.  
Therefore if the infantry should break the enemy's front line, the  
defenders could seal it off much faster than the victorious section  
could consolidate its advance. Should a section retreat, it did so

along its own lines of communication. Therefore the great battles on horseback, envisaged by the commanders and their poet apologists did not materialise. Nonetheless, all ranks were persistently inculcated with the "offensive spirit", particularly the use of the bayonet, which found such an ambivalent place in Sassoon's poem, The Kiss. It is obvious that the hard facts of modern warfare were responsible for the attitude taken to it by its combatant poets.

The final, widely supported idea, found in these poems, is that England would be purged by battle and purified by blood. Suffering, ~~yet to be experienced~~, was believed to absolve those combatants who had right on their side. Thus Bridges:

Much suffering shall cleanse thee;  
But thou through the flood  
Shalt win to Salvation,  
To beauty through blood. (17)

Laurence Binyon also states this:

Endure, O Earth! and thou awaken,  
Purged by this dreadful winnowing-fan,  
O wronged, untamable, unshaken  
Soul of divinely suffering man! (18)

These are the ideas of an older generation of men who did not enlist; yet they are ideas not substantially different from those held by their sons and grandsons.

Rupert Brooke best typifies the attitude of the younger generation to the outbreak of the First World War. He cannot be considered as a war poet since he wrote only a handful of poems on the subject, but he is valuable as an example of what was to be glorified as the right-thinking young English hero, murdered by the Hun. In 1914, at the age of twenty-seven, Brooke had already established himself as a public figure. His physical beauty, athletic prowess, and to a lesser extent, his intellect had

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distinguished his schoolboy days at Rugby and his undergraduate career at Cambridge. As Sassoon put it, after his single meeting with Brooke:

Here I might well have thought - had my divinations  
been expressible - was a being singled out for some  
transplendent performance, some enshrined achievement. (19)

In 1915, Brooke took part in the Gallipoli landings and later met his death on Scyros having apparently been stung by a scorpion. In December 1914, a group of "War Sonnets" had appeared in the final edition of a magazine called New Numbers. It was not until after his death "on active service" that particular attention was paid to them. Winston Churchill quoted them in an obituary; Dean Inge quoted them in his Easter sermon in St. Paul's Cathedral. Brooke's collection of poems, 1914 and Other Poems subsequently went through nine impressions until the group of five "1914" sonnets were printed in pamphlet form, entitled 1914, Five Sonnets by Rupert Brooke. This pamphlet edition sold twenty thousand copies.

These sonnets embody many of the attitudes I have observed in poems by the older generation of established writers. In Peace, Brooke sees war as an ennobling process that would clean and absolve youth from its neurotic preoccupations and, by the agency of suffering, bring about true peace: Brooke thanks God who has made "us"

Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,  
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,  
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,  
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;  
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there  
But only agony, and that has ending;  
And the worst friend and enemy is but death. (20)

17.  
In his analysis of these~~x~~ sonnets, Bernard Bergonzi has claimed that "one very pressing difficulty... is that elements that can be called representative, expressing currents of popular feeling, are closely interwoven with others which are purely personal to Brooke himself." (20) He singles out the line "All the little emptiness of love" and takes it to refer to Brooke's "long and gruelling affair with 'Ka'". It is also possible to read such lines in the spirit of martial ardour expressed in other parts of the poem. If war is to be a cleansing and purifying process, a view shared by many in 1914, including Sassoon, then there must necessarily be something to ~~water~~ wash away. Therefore the specific instances that Brooke gives to illustrate his contention that the world has grown "old and cold and weary", may be read in the tone of high moral indignation of the rest of the sonnet.

There is less concern in Brooke's sonnets with past British glories; the emphasis is on England in the present, recalling the nostalgia of The Great Lover and Grantchester. The rhetorical re-iteration of the words "England" and "English" in Brooke's sonnets is the equivalent of the view that all virtues reside in England, and Brooke's hypothesis is that England has become great again:

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us for our dearth,  
Holiness lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.  
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,  
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;  
And nobleness walks in our ways again;  
And we have come into our heritage. (21)

In The Soldier, Brooke identifies the poet's body with the soil of England; his heart becomes "A pulse in the eternal mind." (This mystical union of the dead with the living occurs in Sassoon's early war poetry, most notably in The Last Meeting and The Brother). The paradox that links life and death is particularly strong in Brooke; thus in Safety:

Safe shall be my going,

Secretly armed against all death's endeavour;  
 Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;  
 And if those poor limbs die, safest of all.

Most critics are agreed that Sassoon's poem, Absolution is the one most initiative of Brooke's sonnets. It has been described as a "banner-bearing poem" which "may be classed as a descendant from Rupert Brooke's little family of 1914 sonnets" <sup>(22)</sup> and "an exercise in the Brookian mode". (23) This is partially true. Absolution, written in three, four-line stanzas, is technically inferior to Brooke's sonnets; only in tone and sentiment is it identical:

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes,  
 Till beauty shines in all <sup>that</sup> things we can see.  
 War is our recourse; yet war has made us wise,  
 And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

All the stock attitudes that I have enumerated are to be found here: the sense of purification, nobility of purpose, the <sup>idea</sup> ~~paradox~~ of the free man fighting for freedom. But these sentiments are not expanded into concrete example as they are in Brooke's sonnets. Sassoon tells us that Absolution subsequently found favour with certain middle-aged reviewers, but it is a lesser poem than any of Brooke's sonnets from which it is derived. However, this poem has nothing of what Bergonzi, in an attack on Brooke's sonnets, calls "the self-regarding element" (24) woven into the general statement of noble purpose. But Sassoon himself observes the real weakness of this poem:

The significance of my too nobly worded lines was that they expressed the typical self-glorifying feelings of a young man about to go to the Front for the first time... but the more I saw of war the less noble-minded I felt about it. (25)

In other words, Absolution is not really about the war that made

itself known to Sassoon. For this reason, it and poems like it, were not included in Sassoon's retrospective collection, War Poems, (26) published in 1919. Even if this poem is read as an attempt to examine the state of mind of a young soldier in the first stages of war experience, it presents only noble abstractions, the ideas with which the "soldier poet" maintains his morale. On this level it is inferior to the similar poem by Laurence Binyon, The Fourth of August:

Now in thy splendour go before us,  
 Spirit of England, ardent-eyed!  
 Enkindle this dear earth that bore us,  
 In the hour of peril purified.

The cares we hugged drop out of vision,  
 Our hearts with deeper thoughts dilate.  
 We step from days of sour division  
 Into the grandeur of our fate. (27)

To My Brother, another poem obviously influenced by Rupert Brooke's work, employs the idea that a man with nobility of purpose is released from shame by the struggle in which he finds himself:

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;  
 Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;  
 For we have made an end of all things base.

The occasion of this poem is the death of Sassoon's brother, David, whose "lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead". The dead man is glorified; his head is "laurelled" and his death, according to the familiar paradox, is "victory". Because of this "victory" the living will "win the light". This idea of unity between the living and the dead in the cause of righteousness is a common theme in early war poetry, an idea which persisted in some quarters until the armistice. An example of this is Galloway Kyle's preface to the second series



Of Soldier Poets - More Songs by Fighting Men, where he says of those who have died:

They are a more glorious and more numerous company than the Elizabethans, with whom, in the great comradeship beyond the grave, they still march, an invisible army, with their brothers-in-arms who continue the material and spiritual warfare here in the flesh, inspiring and directing the fight that will not end with the war. (28)

To My Brother, like Absolution, is not really about what it claims to be; the fact of the brother's death is converted into something else, mystical and rather meaningless.

David Sassoon qualifies as one of the "undying" in The Dragon and the Undying. Written in the decorous decasyllables common among the Georgians and in Sassoon's work, the poem is divided into two parts of six and eight lines respectively. The first part elaborates an image of war as a self-immolating monster, insatiable and violent, bent on the destruction of Beauty, particularly as it is found in architecture:

...the Dragon sings  
And beats upon the dark with furious wings;  
And, stung to rage by his own darting fires,  
Reaches with grappling coils from town to town;  
He lusts to break the loveliness of spires...

The language is paralleled by other poets writing in 1915; typical is the concluding stanza of Julian Grenfell's poem, In Battle:

The thundering line of battle stands,  
And in the air death moans and sings;  
But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,  
And Night shall fold him with soft wings. (29)

The second part of The Dragon and the Undying deals with the victims of this monster - "the slain" who are "vocal ~~III~~ like storn-bewildered seas". The articulation<sup>teness</sup> which is granted to the "undying" is that of the natural phenomena with which they are identified (rather in the way that Brooke identifies himself with England's "suns" and "rivers").

(30)

Their faces are the fair, unshrouded night  
 And planets are their eyes...  
 They wander in the dusk with chanting streams,  
 And they are dawn-lit trees.

In the poem, France, this mystical identification of the soldiers, dead or alive, with the land, becomes more specific and involves the concept of "victory" as an essential ingredient of the exalted mood. The "gloaming," apocalyptic landscape of France ~~"triumph"~~ "triumphs" in "each soldier's heart serene" and suggests to those "who" are fortunate, who fight

... such harmonies as night  
 Only from Heaven be downward wafted -  
 Voices of victory and delight.

Robert Graves, a fellow soldier, was not impressed by such poems as these. In his war memoir, Goodbye to All That, he describes his first impression of Sassoon's poetry:

At this time I was getting my first book of poems, ~~ready~~ Over the Brazier, ready for the press; I had one or two drafts in my pocket-book and showed them to Siegfried. He frowned and said that war should not be written about in such a realistic way. In return, he showed me some of his own poems. One of them began:

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,  
 Not in the woeful crimson of men slain...

Siegfried had not yet been in the trenches. I told him, in my old-soldier manner, that he would soon change his style. (31)

Sassoon soon did change his style; nonetheless, To Victory, the poem quoted by Graves, was not without its admirers. Edward Marsh included it in his 1916/1917 anthology of Georgian Poetry. Thanks to the efforts of Edmund Gosse it had been printed in The Times, prefaced by the phrase "by a private soldier at the front" and modestly initialled "S.S." Lady Ottoline Morrell, the wife of the famous pacifist M.P., Philip Morrell, and a convinced pacifist herself, was so pleased by the poem that she wrote to congratulate its author. Sassoon records that she "found in it 'that infinite quality that haunts one'... a sympathetic desire to fly out beyond into the beauty and colour and freedom that one so longs for." (32) Robert Graves told Sassoon that he would "soon change his style". In fact Sassoon was beginning to feel isolated from beauty. The "gleaning" landscapes, once an integral part of his vision of France become the explicit longings of a poet who desires to appreciate once more "colours that were my joy" in a different context than that of a drab and sordid war:

Not in the woeful crimson of men slain...  
Far from the guns that boom and flash.

In other words Sassoon longs for the sort of idyllic context of his earlier lyrical poems, poems that he continued to write until 1916. To Victory recalls their language and rapture:

I want to fill my gaze with blue and silver,  
Radiance through living roses, spires of green  
Rising in ~~the~~ young-limbed copse...

Desire for this sort of beauty does not spring from a sense of war-weariness:

I am not sad; only I long for lustre.

Although peace is presented as a contrast to war in terms of "radiance" and "lustre," and is whole-heartedly longed for, its "return" can come only through the "Victory" of the title, to which the poem is dedicated.

There is a group of four poems, Before the Battle, The Mystic as Soldier, Secret Music and The Kiss, which, although they deal with the themes of self-glorification, stand apart from the bulk of Sassoon's poems written in the mood Graves ascribed to the "Happy Warrior." They are short-lined poems, tightly rhymed. Tending to deny, by implication, the comradeship eulogised in other poems, they deal with the separateness of the poet who is a sensitive and solitary being, in a manner more mystical than When I'm among a Blaze of Lights:

I lived my days apart,  
Dreaming fair songs for God. (33)

In A Mystic as Soldier, the solitary mystic is distinguished spiritually from his fellow soldiers by his quest for God in the realm of death:

Now God is in the strife,  
And I must seek Him there,  
Where death outnumbers life...

The final stanza describes the necessary war-like passion, justified by the previously described quest for God which supports the mystic in this search. This is contrasted with a plea for the proper harmony to be restored to the mystic's life. Unlike the "anger" in the "brain" which is confined to the intellect, this harmony has to do with the "clay" of the senses:

I walk the secret way

34

With anger in my brain.  
O music through my clay,  
When will you sound again?

In Secret Music, the journey into death has been accomplished.  
In The Mystic as Soldier, the poet had already been "crowned" by  
"glory"; here a further coronation takes place and music returns to  
the solitary mystic:

To the world's end I went, and found  
Death in his carnival of glare;  
But in my torment I was crowned,  
And music dawned above despair.

This music does ~~not~~ correspond to the music of A Mystic as Soldier  
but is "secret." This secrecy expands the idea of the "secret way"  
in A Mystic as Soldier and represents a mystical coming to terms with  
the spiritual and emotional pressures of war. The "secret music"  
involves the "glory" in the poet's heart but has now undergone a test  
of endurance and can be linked with a correspondingly tested "beauty":

I keep such music in my brain  
No din this side of death can quell;  
Glory exulting over pain,  
And beauty, garlanded in hell.

In both poems there is a confidence in the essential harmony of the  
world. Thus "God is in the strife" and "beauty" is "garlanded in hell."  
Above all, the spirit nurtured by the intuitive apprehension of these  
harmonies, is separate from war and cannot be disturbed by it:

My dreaming spirit will not heed  
The roar of guns...  
... that on the gloom can read  
Proud-surgings melodies of joy.

This basic idea occurs in Before the Battle in which Nature is invoked as a protection; it is this idea that unifies Before the Battle with A Mystic as Soldier and Secret Music, although it is technically dissimilar. It is composed of two stanzas of six and seven lines rhymed in couplets rather than three four-line stanzas rhymed alternately. Dated June 25th 1916, this poem was written before the Battle of the Somme. The description of trees, water and birds corresponds to the description of the River Marais in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (34) and was Sassoon's last contact with such scenes before his first real encounter with trench warfare.

I have no need to pray  
That fear may pass away;  
I scorn the growl and rumble of the fight  
That summons me from cool  
Silence of marsh and pool...

The attitude of aloofness, the concern only with nature and scorn of war was soon to give way to a concern with the precise description and evocation of realities on the Front Line.

The last poem which may be considered with this group, is The Kiss. There has been an amount of unnecessary speculation about Sassoon's intention in writing this poem, deriving from Graves' comment on it in Goodbye to All That:

Siegfried's unconquerable idealism changed direction with his environment: he varied between happy warrior and bitter pacifist. His poem:

To these I turn, in these I trust,  
Brother Lead and Sister Steel;  
To his blind power I make appeal,  
I guard her beauty clean from rust...

had originally been inspired by Colonel Campbell, V.C.'s

blood-thirsty "Spirit of the Bayonet" address at an army school. Later, Siegfried offered it as a satire; and it certainly comes off, whichever way you read it. (35)

First published in May 1916, The Kiss was written at the Officer's Training Camp at Flixecourt. Its inspiration is described in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer:

The lecturer's voice still battered on my brain. "The bullet and bayonet are brother and sister." "If you don't kill him, he'll kill you." "Stick him between the eyes, in the throat, in the chest." "Don't waste good steel. Six inches are enough. What's the use of a foot of steel sticking out at the back of a man's neck? Three inches will do for him; when he coughs, go and look for another." (36)

If this poem is read as Sassoon originally intended, its bloodthirstiness is that engendered by the "anger" of A Mystic as Soldier and the tone is similar to Secret Music where the action of battle is a torment, a form of dementia. This poem has something of the mysticism of such poems; the mystic has two allies in his task: the bullet and the bayonet:

He spins and burns and loves the air  
And splits a skull to win my praise;  
But up the nobly marching days  
She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this;  
That in good fury he may feel  
The body where he sets his heel  
Quail from your downward darting kiss.

That this sort of attitude was prevalent is well attested in contemporary poems. Examples are W.W. Gibson's

This bloody steel  
Has killed a man.  
I heard him squeal  
As on I ran. (37)

from The Bayonet, or from Robert Nichols' The Assault:

A sudden thrill -  
'Fix Bayonets!'  
Gods! we have our fill  
Of fear, hysteric, exultation, rage,  
Rage to kill. (38)

That Sassoon should later offer The Kiss as a satirical poem demonstrates the radical alteration of his attitude to the war. Differently interpreted, the poem expresses a depth of war-like emotion, rather than a height, thereby illustrating the state of mind of one ill-equipped to make a mature judgement on the fighting. Illustrative of this is Herbert Read's Happy Warrior in which the attitude of mind described in The Kiss and the other poems quoted, fails to sustain the soldier and acts as an ironic comment on his actual condition:

His wild heart beats with painful sob,  
His strained hands clench an ice-cold rifle,  
His aching jaws grip a hot, parched tongue,  
And his wide eyes search unconsciously.  
He cannot shriek  
Bloody saliva  
Dribbles down his shapeless jacket.  
I saw him stab  
And stab again  
A well-killed Boche.  
This is the happy warrior  
This is he... (39)



Towards the end of April 1916, Sassoon visited the Fourth Army School at Flixecourt for a month's course of training. Although The Kiss was written here, it is largely out of tune with Sassoon's prevailing mood, one of "spiritual exaltation." He writes:

Meanwhile that Muse of mine could still bring me  
the relief of idyllic and melodious utterance, in  
which I indulged freely... (40)

Several of the poems gathered in Morning Glory were written in the pleasant country round Flixecourt; of those grouped together in Collected Poems under the sub-title War Poems 1915/17, The Last Meeting and ~~THE LAST MEETING~~ A Letter Home are subscribed with its name. The Last Meeting illustrates Sassoon's comment in Siegfried's Journey:

The world around me was luminous and lovely; I was  
filled with physical gratitude for it; and I strove  
to express that vision with spiritual exaltation.  
My dreams were mine, and even the rigorous routine  
of infantry warfare could not dispel them. (41)

The beauty of natural surroundings was capable of proving to Sassoon that essential harmonies underlay experience. The Last Meeting is based on the ideas that the dead are mystically unified with the living and that the solitary is capable of understanding such divinations and ordering them in his mind. The poet determines to visit a beautiful and loved place in order

To find the face of him that I have lost  
And speak with him.

Passing through the village, peopled by "humble, kindly folk," he goes to a "big, empty house", a "ghostly hulk" unfurnished because of the war. The house is "quite empty,"

... it could hold  
 His human ghost, remembered in the love  
 That strove in vain to be companioned still.

In the second part of the poem, Sassoon succeeds in conjuring up the ghost of the dead man by the agency of 'nature. Like the "green spires" of To Victory, the forms of nature suggest the forms and atmosphere of religious architecture:

I found a holy dimness, and the peace  
 Of sanctuary, austerely built of trees...

There is no need to invoke the ghost with artificial devices; the dead man is totally identified with the world. Sassoon expands the theme of the mystical absorption of the spirit of the dead by the beautiful forms of nature, and makes the "ghost" articulate:

My body is the magic of the world,  
 And dawn and sunset flame with my spilt blood.  
 My breath is the great wind...

The process does not end here. The living may be brought to a new awareness of beauty by recognising in it the essence of the dead. On a less exalted level, the third part of the poem deals with the poet's decision to recognise the dead man's spirit in "new loveliness":

Thus, when I find new loveliness to praise,  
 And things long-known shine out in sudden grace,  
 Then will I think: "He moves before me now."  
 So he will never come but in delight...

Another poem written at Flixecourt - A Letter Home, addressed to Robert Graves - treats the theme of The Last Meeting on a humorous level. "Soldier David," presumably killed in action, is

described as a "Green Man" who sings a madrigal in the woods and behaves like a mythical prince. He marches over the Welsh countryside with trees for comrades and spends the night sheltering in "hilly nooks." The officer in him is not dead, however:

Yes, it's certain, here he teaches  
Outpost schemes to groups of beeches.

This treatment of the theme is perhaps more successful, although the poem ends on a facile note of optimism. It looks forward to some time in the future when certain unspecified "Dreams will triumph":

War's a joke for me and you  
While we know such dreams are true.

This is not the sort of joke likely to be cracked by the man shot through the throat in A Whispered Tale:

And still you whisper of the war, and find  
Sour jokes for all those horrors left behind.

The short poem To His Dead Body was also addressed to Graves. It was written while Sassoon was under the impression that his friend had been killed. Graves' next of kin had in fact been informed of his apparent death. The failure of this poem - that of irrelevance to its subject on any profound level - is the failure of many of Sassoon's early war poems. Initially the man is killed on a fairly realistic level -

... roaring gloom surged inward and you cried,  
Groping for friendly hands, and clutched, and died... -

but the essence of the man, consisting of "phantoms of thought and memory," is speeded to the care of a ludicrous father-figure who bears a resemblance to Father Christmas:

Dear red-faced father God who lit your mind.

The poem is therefore ambiguous. It could be read in the bantering manner of A Letter Home, yet it was written to mark an occasion which gave Sassoon considerable grief.

During the months preceding his stay at Flixecourt, Sassoon's "noble-minded" attitude to the war began to give way to a greater concern with documenting the realities of trench warfare at its most literal level, without, as yet, making moral judgements on it. He writes:

This gradual process began, in the first months of 1916 with a few genuine trench poems, dictated by my resolve to record my surroundings, and usually based on the notes I was making whenever I could do so with detachment. These poems aimed at impersonal description of front-line conditions, and could at least claim to be the first things of their kind. (42)

At this time, the average "soldier-poet" was still idealising his homesickness and the average poem was an escapist day-dream. Galloway Kyle's anthology exemplifies this. (43) What was actually happening in the trenches was not considered suitable subject matter for poetry. Therefore Sassoon's claim to have produced something original was not unfounded. His new poems are all the more remarkable when one considers the context in which they were produced, and the current taste in war poetry that has been illustrated. Sassoon's "journalistic" poems establish the ~~for~~ foundation of the taste in war poetry that has endured. The desire to convey to the public an accurate impression of trench life, sprang from a sense of war-weariness. The war had been sufficiently lauded as a great crusade; but it had become a long-drawn-out and bitter struggle, the nature of which Sassoon wished to describe rather than condemn. He was soon to discover that the facts themselves entailed moral judgements and that his bitter, pacifist poems arose quite naturally from the impression recorded in his war diary.

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Together with the earlier poem Stretcher-Case, these poems purely descriptive of war conditions form a distinct group; they are When I'm Among a Blaze of Lights, A Subaltern, The Road, In the Pink and A Working Party. Sassoon has called Stretcher-Case "an objective and mildly satirical description of a wounded soldier's sensations" (44) and on this level the poem is a success. The actual musings of the "stretcher-case" are no more sophisticated than the cogitations of the old huntsman in the poem of the same name:

He sighed, confused; then drew a cautious breath;  
This level journeying was no ride through death.  
'If I were dead,' he mused, 'there'd be no thinking...'

On the whole, the delight of the fortunate soldier at finding himself "back in Blighty" is convincing.

In the bulk of these "journalistic" poems Sassoon uses the conversational manner that he had already put to good effect in The Daffodil Murderer and The Old Huntsman, but uses it in more personal situations. Two of these poems deal with Sassoon's relations with his fellow officers. A rather petty poem, When I'm Among a Blaze of Lights expresses the poet's love of nature, books and paintings and his reliance on their memory during rather vulgar social occasions:

Of things like these I choose to think  
When I can never be alone:  
Then someone says 'Another drink?'  
And turns my living heart to stone.

The concluding line has something of the sting of later satirical pieces but the target is obscure. The fact that Sassoon's presence seems superfluous, that nobody is compelling him to listen to the "tawdry music" and that he is thrown into despair by the offer of another drink, makes him seem priggish.

Sassoon's reaction to his fellow officers is more acceptable in A Subaltern. The sense of a deep relationship is evoked between

the poet who is cast in the rôle of sympathetic listener and the shy young subaltern whose "fresh face slowly brightening to the grin" sets the poet's memory

... back to summer days,  
With twenty runs to make, and last man in.

This peaceful cricketing memory is contrasted with the present rigours of trench life where the young man had endured "a bloody time..."

... crouching for the crumps to burst,  
While squeaking rats scampered across the slime.

Such contrasts are then deliberately rendered invalid and therefore doubly ironic by the lack of any correspondence between life at home and life in the trenches, on a level meaningful to the suffering soldiers. Here again the seeds of bitterness and satirical comment begin to emerge naturally from pure realism; the "blankness" of the Subaltern's mind makes its own point. But this "blankness" is ambivalent; it also suggests a defence mechanism which can protect the young officer from the hardships of his life. The sympathy that exists between the two men also strikes an optimistic note but this is contradicted by his response to the friendliness offered by the poet:

'Good God!' he laughed, and slowly filled his pipe,  
Wondering why he always talked such tripe.'

The use of an idyllic picture of England to provide a contrast by which to assess and evaluate trench life soon became unreal to Sassoon; the interests of home and front-line seemed no longer part of the same experience. In fact the emotional link between the trenches and England became severely strained as the war continued. This process of alienation became an important weapon in Sassoon's satirical poems. In the "journalistic" poems, England is specified in the actual loyalties of men to sweethearts, wives, home-towns and in

their sporting activities, especially hunting and cricket. By a process of simple contrasts the description of the relation of these to the soldier and the trench situation, is used to make the war substantial for the reader. After the battle of the Somme, many soldiers felt that nobody at home was concerned with their suffering. The "home-front" seemed peopled with callous and ignorant journalists, brass-hats, politicians and profiteers rather than faithful and devoted wives and mothers. Correspondingly Sassoon's verse became more satirical, directed against the abuses of Church, Army and State in the conduct of the war. His sincere indignation drove him to reverse his system of contrasts, using the horrors of trench warfare and the plight of the soldiers to implement his attack on the "home-front."

Ideas similar to those of A Subaltern are found in The Road. However, the women waiting at home are brought nearer the soldier; their invisible presence lines the road along which the soldiers pass. They are

A patient crowd...

Silent, worn out with waiting, sick with fear.

The road passes through the "dregs of battle" - dead men and horses that are ~~realistically~~ the real objects that throng the road. The poem singles out and addresses an individual - "poor, sprawling Jock" - in order to demonstrate the mental as well as physical isolation of such soldiers from the women at home:

You did not feel her arms about your knees,

Her blind caress, her lips upon your head.

Too tired for thoughts of home and love and care,

The road would serve you well enough for bed.

The division between war and home, civilian ignorance and the futility of woman's grief, prominent in later poems such as The Hero, Suicide in the Trenches and Remorse, are to be observed in this poem.

Nonetheless Sassoon is content to use images of home life as terms of

reference to bring proportion to these descriptive poems. 45

Two poems which illustrate this point are In the Pink and A Working Party. In three stanzas In the Pink describes the contrasting conditions of a private soldier in the past, present and future. At the present moment, "Davies" is "in the pink" and has written home:

He'd had a drink  
Of rum and tea; and, though the barn was chilly,  
For once his blood ran warm...

In the second stanza this feeling of well-being is replaced by memories of the past. Davies recalls

Sundays at the farm,  
And how he'd go as cheerful as a lark  
In his best suit, to wander arm in arm  
With brown-eyed Gwen...

In the third stanza a Bankness of mind similar to that of the Subaltern blots out these memories with its prediction:

Tomorrow night we trudge  
Up the trenches and my boots are rotten.  
Five miles of stodgy clay and freezing sludge,  
And everything but wretchedness forgotten.

The concluding lines imply that the soldier is suffering needlessly. He does not know why he finds himself in such a position:

Tonight he's in the pink; but soon he'll die,  
And still the war goes on - HE don't know why.

In A Working Party another soldier, "a decent chap," is sniped. The poem unifies the soldier with his surroundings in a way quite removed from Sassoon's earlier theories; now he is as clumsy and grotesque as the landscape of war:



Sometimes he tripped and lurched against the walls  
 With hands that pawed the sodden bags of chalk .

The only difference between him now and when he becomes a "jolting lump" is that he becomes "Beyond all need of tenderness and care." His death is the process which finally merges him with his surroundings. While he is alive the stanza which describes his family and home in a Midland town is all that distinguishes him from his environment; but this has nothing to do with his current situation as it shows a contrasting state of living. Ironically the only other feature which distinguishes him from his environment is the flare that causes his death.

These two poems show that Sassoon was beginning to reject the idea that a dualism exists between the mind and the body. The notion that some sort of spirit has the power to transcend the physical is readily discernible in Absolution or The Last Meeting; but Sassoon was discovering with Edmund Blunden that:

The effect on the soul depended very closely on what happened to the body. We did not leave our bodies at the transport lines. (45)

The adolescent may suffer from this feeling of dualism: the body appears to mature before the emotions, the intellect before the body. In the trenches there can be no such distinction. This is what lies behind Sassoon's comment that his war experience "made a man" of him. It also gave him the basis for a wider sympathy in which a feeling for the total man is involved, not just his physical plight or his mental condition in some way separable and divorced.

Similarly Sassoon came to see the inadequacy of the Christian analogy in war poetry. Harold John Jervis' At a Wayside Shrine describes the soldiers as "these other Christs in thin disguise." Sassoon sees a sentry keeping watch on Golgotha, a descriptive piece evocative of the tediousness of war; in The Redeemer, however, he explores the

soldier-Christ analogy more fully. The Redeemer was a very popular poem in 1916. It first appeared in the April number of The Cambridge Magazine and was printed in three subsequent editions of Sassoon's poems <sup>(47)</sup> and in Georgian Poetry 1916/17. It has not found favour with later reviewers and was excluded from Collected Poems. Evidently its impeccable sentiments appealed to a group who did not approve of his later work.

In The Redeemer, the analogy between Christ carrying the cross and the private soldier shouldering his load of duck-boards, is tenable only on a superficial level:

I say that he was Christ; stiff in the glare,  
And leaning forward from His burdening task,  
Both arms supporting it.

It is the second assertion that fails on both the superficial and the religious levels:

I say that he was Christ, who wrought to bless  
All groping things with freedom bright as air,  
And with his mercy washed and made them fair.

How this "simple chap" who endures "Horror and pain", unable to make moral judgements ("unjudging") in any sense resembles a "Redeemer" or can give any form of benediction, is not made explicit. The reader can only assume that Christ is partaking of the soldier's suffering and that the poet has seen a vision, an apocalypse. In this way Sassoon loosely identifies the cause of the Great War with the Christian myth of Redemption, attempting to unite them in terms of direct realism. This was a common enough attitude, the ironies of which Sassoon was already beginning to perceive:

And someone flung his burden in the muck,  
Mumbling: 'O Christ Almighty, now I'm stuck!'

Enemies deals with a glimpsed situation occurring between enemies after death, rather in the manner of Owen's Strange Meeting. Sassoon's poem possibly provided Owen with the inspiration of his own which expands its prototype in more specific terms, actually describing the "long, dark tunnel" down which the dead men travelled. In Enemies, ghosts of dead "hulking Germans", killed by the poet in revenge for a friend's death, throng round the Englishman's ghost. The simplicity of the lines, the economy of the setting - "some queer, sunless place" - and the half-comprehended reproaches of "Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men", contain Sassoon's meaning in a unity of context, form and language. It is this ability that ex<sup>m</sup>plifies Sassoon's powers as a poet, powers that he was soon to use with devastating effect against targets more explicit than the paradox of living to die in the trenches. This poem ends on a note of optimism; a reconciliation occurs between the enemies:

At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand  
Because his face could make them understand.

There is no mention here of the "crazed and driven foe." Nowhere does Sassoon express the anti-German sentiments that invade the "crusading" poems of the early part of the war.

The Death-Bed resembles Enemies in so far as the sense of frustration is not directed against the enemy but against death and war. ~~Although largely describing~~ in a realistic way, the feelings and sensations of a young, dying man, The Death-Bed contains a protest at the arbitrary way that Death is apportioned:

He's young; he hated War; how should he die  
When cruel, old campaigners win safe through?

Nonetheless in death there is the safety expressed in Brooke's sonnet:

And there was safety in the summer night;

Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.

Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

In this poem the three major elements of Sassoon's war poetry are to be found: the optimism of Absolution, the realism and compassionate descriptiveness, and the concise, bitter protest that was to become his distinctive manner.

Sassoon's poetic progress from the early, weak patriotic poems, through the realistically descriptive poems based on incidents reported in his note-book to the sharp, satirical poems, is paralleled in Herbert Read's development as a poet. In The Contrary Experience Read writes:

The impact of the war on my sensibility is best revealed in the change which came to my writing during the period... it was a change of content rather than of technique. (48)

To poets indignant at the prolongation of the war and the falsification of facts for propagandist purposes, technique was of use only in as much as it facilitated the presentation of the argument. Articulation, not creativity, provided the desired effect. Sassoon's technique altered only as his attitude to the war became increasingly hostile; his poems became shorter and their impact more direct. This change of attitude was not confined to Sassoon and Read but was shared by many other writers and is well attested in their work. Henri Barbusse speaks for many in Le Feu:

War is frightful and unnatural weariness, water up to the belly, mud and dung and infamous filth. It is befouled faces and tattered flesh... It is that, that endless monotony of misery broken by poignant tragedies; it is that and not the bayonet glittering like silver, nor the bugle's chanticleer to the sun. (49)

The development of Sassoon's war poetry mirrors this development of the war; his protest arose quite naturally out of the apparently changing conditions. Edmund Blunden again expresses the general feeling; he observed a "change that was coming over the war, (5) the induration from a personal crusade into a vast machine of violence". An increase in pacifist thinking at home, led by the Morells, Bertrand Russell and Lytton Strachey was matched by a certain amount of unrest among the writers and intellectuals in the trenches. Robert Graves lists

...Osbert and Sacha Verell Sitwell, Herbert Read, Siegfried, Wilfred Owen, myself and most other young writers of the time, none of whom now believed in the war. (51)

It was not always easy for the harassed and mentally disturbed soldier to analyse and express his thoughts about the war. It is not therefore surprising that H.G. Wells' Mr. Britling Sees It Through was "more of a revelation" to Siegfried Sassoon than anything he had read. One passage in particular caught his attention:

It is now a war like any other of the mobbing, many-aimed cataclysms that have shattered empires and devastated the world; it is a war without point, a war that has lost its soul; it has become mere incoherent fighting and destruction, a demonstration in vast and tragic forms of the stupidity and ineffectiveness of our species... (52)

These sentiments were not widely held on the homefront by wives and mothers or men too old to fight. Even the soldier's right to question his own death was widely denied. Writing after the war, Douglas Jerrold claimed that prose works of the war failed to point out that the "individual in modern warfare is not a fighting unit." (53)

The troops were fed this sort of propaganda in periodicals like John

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Bull, yet were forbidden to read any journal, like The Nation, suspected of pacifism. The reaction of the soldiers was to discourage patriotic dogma in their comrades and to disbelieve the anti-German propaganda spread about by the authorities. Because of these radical differences in attitude, relations between the soldiers and non-combatants were becoming increasingly difficult. The lack of connection between England and the trenches is recalled by Sassoon in Siegfried's Journey. His unsensational description of his experience of this division in the nation, involves the sadness of the junior officer on leave and his sense of alienation from his old environment, feelings that are sometimes obscured by the ferocity of the war poems. Sassoon's awareness of the situation is heightened by the contrast between the trenches and a tea-party with his Uncle Hamo and his uncle's friend, Mr. Horniman:

The contrast between the war the infantry knew and having tea with Mr. Horniman - could the two things be mentally digested and rationalised by a kindly pat on the back from one's elders? .... It wasn't possible to imagine oneself even hinting to them, that the Somme battle was - to put it mildly - an inhuman and beastly business. One had to behave nicely about it to them, keeping up a polite pretence that to have taken part in it was a glorious and acceptable adventure. They must know what it was costing in lives of course; the casualty lists had told them that... I had felt that no explanation of mine could ever reach my elders - that they weren't capable of wanting to know the truth. Their attitude was to insist that it was splendid to be in the front-line. So it was - if one came out of it safely. But I resented their patriotic suppression of those aspects of war which never got into the papers... I began to feel that although I didn't want to upset Uncle Hamo, I should like to give some of the comfortable civilians a few shocks, even if they were to accuse me of being wrong-headed and

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ungentlemanly. Needless to say, a good many of them did. (54)

Sassoon's changing attitude to the war was naturally reflected in his writing:

Nothing I had written before 1916 showed any symptom of this development. It was as if I had suddenly found myself to be an expert boxer without having undergone any training... I merely chanced on the device of composing two or three harsh, peremptory, and colloquial stanzas with a knock-out blow in the last line. (55)

The first of these poems was written while Sassoon was attempting to convey the realities of trench life in poetic form. In Siegfried's Journey he describes "Stand-to: Good Friday Morning as the only poem "which anticipated my later successes in condensed satire... a jaunty scrap of doggerel versified from a rough note in my diary." (56) This poem demonstrates not how Sassoon experienced a tremendous change of heart, but how his satirical poems arose quite naturally from his attempts to define the realities of trench life in verse. As Sassoon says:

... it summarised the feelings of thousands of other platoon commanders, and I consider it one of the most effective of my war productions. (57)

The language is suitably blunt. The poem opens:

I'd been on duty from two till four.  
I went and stared at the dug-out door.  
Down in the frost I heard them snore.  
'Stand to!' Somebody grunted and swore.

It follows with a description of nature that is disjointed and disunified; the larks are "discordant" and the poet feels "ill." His figure (far removed from the context of Absolution) staggers up to the front line,

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sending up a prayer:

O Jesus, send me a wound today,  
And I'll believe in your bread and wine,  
And get my bloody old sins washed white!

These lines<sup>es</sup> inevitably gave offence. Sassoon records an extreme example which occurred six years after the poem had been written:

... the reprinting of these lines in a New Zealand Socialist paper caused the editor to be prosecuted for blasphemous libel. After several days of law-court proceedings the editor was discharged - the jury adding a rider 'that similar publications of such literature be discouraged.' (58)

As far as the modern reader is concerned, the hard realism of the poem contains the three concluding lines in perfect unity; and from this unity comes the force of the satire which displays the inadequacy of religious consolation under trench conditions.

A similar contrast is used in At Carnoy where the actual physical situation of the soldiers is more comfortable. They are camped in a hollow behind the lines, chatting and playing the mouth-organ while the poet watches the sun go down:

Crouched among the thistle-tufts I've watched the glow  
Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;  
And I'm content. Tomorrow we must go  
To take some cursed Wood... O world God made!

Since God is blamed for creating the world, the implication is ironic and the scepticism of Stand-to: Good Friday Morning is expressed more obliquely.

If God, provided He exists, deserves blame for his creation,



His ministers deserve more blame, in Sassoon's eyes, for their interpretation of it. In They a Bishop expresses conventional sentiments concerning the war:

'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
'New right to breed an honourable race...'

In the second stanza, the Bishop receives his answer from "the boys." In his description of the circumstances under which this poem was written, Sassoon remarks that it "subsequently proved to be the most publicly effective poem" he had written.

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.'  
And The Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

The effect of the poem derives from the hollowness of the Bishop's abstract ideas when they are compared with the stark realities of injury and death. The subtle use of the caesura emphasises the meaning by supressing the musical flow of the metre. Faced with these facts, the Bishop prefers to twist his dogmas to embrace the situation, rather than to verify them empirically; this bland assumption on the part of the cleric provides the satirical impact of the last line.

Unconsciously, and growing out of a desire for truth, Sassoon created the taste by which his own early poems, the war sonnets of Brooke and the writing of many young soldier poets may be condemned. Just as the Bishop's pompous phrases are inadequate as an analysis of the situation they describe, heroic poems expressing the unity of the living and the dead, the exaltation and absolution of the earth in time

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of anguish, and the glory of combat, do not describe the brute realities of the fighting on the Somme or at Passchendaele. It may be argued that Sassoon uses his material on its lowest level; it is his intention, however, to shape this material into a wider significance by economy in the selection of it.

Another poem, The Choral Union, attacks the attitude of the church and its inadequate consolations for the war-weary. A Drunken soldier on leave, who has "guzzled like a hog," finds his way into a choral concert. In his stupor he imagines that he has been admitted to Heaven. In fact he is mingling with two of Sassoon's favourite targets - the well-fed priest and smug civilian who are listening to the local choir:

and everyone seemed good;

And clergymen were sitting meekly round  
With joyful faces, drinking in the sound;  
And holy women, and plump whiskered men.  
Could this be Heaven?

Nonetheless the weight of his sins pressed on him; consequently, anxiously whispering "Hallelujah", "He wondered when Lord God would turn him out."

The "holy women, and plump whiskered men" are the representatives of those callous civilians who carefully and deliberately preserved their ignorance of the suffering of their soldier sons. This ignorance provides the fuel for the poem The Hero. In three, six-line stanzas, Sassoon undermines the glory of dying for one's country and provides a "thoroughly caddish antidote to the glorification of 'the supreme sacrifice'..." (59) The poem was first published in The Cambridge Magazine and once again Sassoon had "hit the mark" and offended a large body of public opinion. He had already published 'outspoken' poems in this magazine but it was The Hero that provoked a letter from

an old Cambridge man who claimed to be 'an average Englishman, pained, not to say disgusted, that such a thing... should appear in a magazine connected with the

The attitude of the mother in The Hero - "we mothers are so proud of our dead ~~sons~~ soldiers" - is identical with that of the author of the widely reprinted letter from "A Little Mother" to the editor of The Morning Post:

We women pass on the human ammunition of 'only sons' to fill up the gaps, so that when the 'common soldier' looks back before going 'over the top' he may see the women of the British race at his heels, reliable, dependent, uncomplaining. (61)

In The Hero an officer is telling a "little mother" of her son's death in action, supporting the letter from the colonel. The proud and sorrowing mother says that "Jack fell as he'd have wished." However, the truth about her "brave, her glorious boy" does not correspond with the colonel's letter. With the full force of the rhyming couplets, it occurs to the officer, who had told some "gallant lies,"

how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,  
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine  
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried  
To get sent home, and how, at last, he'd died,  
Blown to small bits.

The attack is not directed at the mother who has little else for solace but her belief in her son's heroism, nor at Jack for his cowardice. It is the reader's complacency, his refusal to admit the truth of these too common episodes or to absorb them into his comprehension of the nature of war, and the lack of humanity consequent on such an attitude. After all,

no-one seemed to care  
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

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In The Tombstone Maker, the civilian is again under attack and is identified with the craftsman in the poem. The tombstone maker is bemoaning the fact that he has lost most of his trade because so many are dying abroad and ~~claims~~<sup>4i</sup> that unless the war ends, he'll "soon be broke." The man's selfishness and lack of humanity draw an ironic retort from the poet whose response is to retail a typical item of official propaganda:

I told him with a sympathetic grin,  
That Germans boil dead soldiers down for fat;  
And he was horrified. 'What shameful sin!  
'O sir, that Christian souls should come to that!

The irony here is triple-edged. Firstly, the tombstone maker is sarcastically reassured that, although he has lost his trade, nobody else is getting it. Secondly, boiling down dead soldiers for fat is only another way of making profit from the corpses. Thirdly, "Christian souls" must have sunk very low to engage in such slaughter, regardless of how they dispose of the bodies. The civilian target is thus demolished, but the poet's victory is somehow hollow; he is able to expose but unable to overcome the barrier of moral cowardice.

The sense of frustration and hatred connected with the civilian ignorance of the facts, increased the poet's desire to rub their noses in the realities of the trenches. Blighters expresses this rage with the full epigrammatic force of Sassoon's disgust and an almost puritanical zeal:

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin  
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks  
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;  
'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!'

I'd like to see a tank come down the stalls,  
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',  
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls  
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

Wounds also provide Sassoon with bitter ammunition. The pathos of the man shot through the throat in A Whispered Tale is not as accomplished as Wilfrid Owen's poems in the same manner. However, such lines as

But you, good, simple soldier, seasoned well  
In woods and posts and crater-lines of hell,  
Who dodge remembered 'crumps' with wry grimace,  
Endured experience in your queer, kind face,  
Fatigues and vigils haunting nerve-strained eyes,  
And both your brothers killed to make you wide;  
You had no babbling phrases...

recall the perfectly evoked spirit of Graves' It's a Queer Time. ~~but~~ Sassoon is more assured when his consideration of the injured is subordinated to his satiric purpose. In The One-Legged Man, the reader is lulled by the easy contentment of the man viewing "the August Weald" - rural England, described in terms dictated by the Georgian sensibility:

Squat orchard tree and oasts with painted cows;  
A homely, tangled hedge, corn-stalked field,  
And sound of barking dogs and farmyard fowls.

He ponders on the life of a simple man and how just it is that such a man should marry and live to old age, freed from the war by a wound. Although the reader has been told that the man is "propped on a stick" (suggesting a walking-stick rather than a crutch) he is totally unprepared for the truth of the situation:

He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,  
And thought: 'Thank God they had to amputate!'

The injury is discordant with the pleasant rural scene, yet it is the man's joy that shocks, <sup>and</sup> the disturbing association of the words "hobble" and "blithely". This ignoble unwillingness to continue with the war, whatever the price in terms of injury or honour is also found in Arms

and the Man. Here the soldier-hero "though his wound was healed and mended... hoped to get his leave extended."

Died of Wounds is a more profoundly effective poem, which takes a badly wounded man for its subject. Sassoon writes:

In Died of Wounds I had hit on a laconic anecdotal method of writing which astonished me by the way in which it indirectly expressed my passionate feeling about the agonising episode described. (61)

In the first stanza, pity mingles with irony to produce an almost hysterical effect which suggests the hatred mixed with intense compassion often experienced by people who must endure another's suffering. Here the simple poetic devices used by Sassoon - alliteration, rhyming couplets and bare vocabulary - create an impression of stark reality:

His wet white face and miserable eyes  
Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs;  
But hoarse and low and rapid rose and fell  
His troubled voice: he did the business well.

In the second stanza the man's delirium becomes articulate. The agonised phrases contain the torture of the man's experience; his concern for "Dickie" arouses intense compassion in the reader:

The ward grew dark; but he was still complaining  
And calling out for 'Dickie'. 'Curse the Wood!  
'It's time to go. O Christ, and what's the good?  
'We'll never take it, and it's always raining!'

In the final stanza the emotions aroused by the preceding stanzas are negated. The man dies and his concern for Dickie dies with him. Compassion for the man ceases with his death. Next day the man's bed is occupied ~~in~~ by the more fortunate "Slight Wound." Sassoon relates this

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incident in more detail<sup>4</sup> in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, and adds

All the horror of the Somme attacks was in that raving;  
all the darkness and dreadful daylight. (62)

It was this "horror", "darkness and dreadful daylight" that Sassoon hoped to convey. In his autobiographical writings Sassoon frequently suggests that the changes that came about in his style of writing poetry were the results of happy accidents or fortuitous inspiration. However a chronological study of his war poems suggests that the process of changing from a conventional "soldier-poet" to a bitter satirist passionately concerned with suffering is closely linked with Sassoon's responses to the war and his own changing attitudes and preoccupations.

#### Footnotes to Chapter Two

- 1) This is the common mis-quotation of the title of H.G. Wells' book, The War That Will End War (Palmer, London, 1914)
- 2) A Choice of Kipling's Verse (Faber & Faber, London, 1951) p.128.
- 3) *ibid.* p.140.
- 4) An example of this is provided by Henry Chappell, the "Bath Railway Poet" in The Day:

You spied for the Day, you lied for the Day,

And woke the Day's red spleen. etc.

(undated reprint from the London  
Daily Express)

- 5) Poems of the Great War (Chatto & Windus, London, 1914) p.15.
- 6) ibid. Wake Up, England & The Vigil pp.8 & 9.
- 7) A Choice of Kipling's Verse p.138.
- 8) Poems of the Great War, We Willed It Not p.33.
- 9) ibid. p.11.
- 10) ibid. prefatory note.
- 11) ibid. Drinkwater, WE Willed It Not p.33.
- 12) ibid. Watson, To the Troubler of the World p.11.
- 13) ibid. Binyon, The Fourth of August p.14.
- 14) ibid. To England: To Strike Quickly p.12.
- 15) ibid. Wake Up, England p.7.
- 16) ibid. R.E. Vernede, England to the Sea, p.19
- 17) ibid. Wake Up, England p.8.
- 18) ibid. The Fourth of August p.14.
- 19) The Weald of Youth p.231.
- 20) Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke (Faber & Faber, London, 1960)  
p.19.
- 20) Heroes' Twilight, A study of the Literature of the Great War



- (Constable, London, 1965) p.42.
- 22) Edmund Blunden, War Poets 1914-1918 (Longmans, London, 1958) p.25.
- 23) Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight p.92.
- 24) *ibid.* p.43.
- 25) The Weald of Youth p.17.
- 26) Sassoon called this volume "a tract against war."
- 27) Poems of The Great War p.13.
- 28) (London, 1917)
- 29) Up the Line to Death (anthol.) Ed. Brian Gardner (Methuen, London, 1964) p.34.
- 30) The Soldier
- 31) Goodbye to All That (Penguin, London, 1961) p.146.
- 32) The Weald of Youth p.3.
- 33) A Mystic as Soldier
- 34) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (Faber & Faber, London, 1965) p.43.
- 35) Goodbye to All That p.226.
- 36) p.12.
- 37) Collected Poems 1905-25 (Macmillan, London, 1926)
- 38) Ardours and Endurances (Chatto & Windus, London, 1917)
- 39) Poems 1914-1934 (Faber & Faber, London, 1935)
- 40) Siegfried's Journey (Faber & Faber, London, 1945) p.18.

- 41) ibid. p.18
- 42) ibid. p.17
- 43) see pp. 29-30.
- 44) Siegfried's Journey p.5.
- 45) Undertones of War (World's Classics, London, 1956)
- 46) More Songs by Fighting Men (2nd. series)
- 47) War Poems 1919, Augustan Book, <sup>Collected Poems 1908-1956</sup> ~~Cambridge Magazine Reprints.~~
- 48) (Faber & Faber, London, 1963) p.214.
- 49) Under Fire (Dent, London, 1929) p.325.
- 50) Undertones of War
- 51) Goodbye to All That p.204.
- 52) Siegfried's Journey p.41.
- 53) The Lie About the War (London, Faber & Faber, 1930)
- 54) Siegfried's Journey p.14.
- 55) ibid. p.29.
- 56) ibid. p.17.
- 57) ibid. p.18.
- 58) ibid. p.17.
- 59) ibid. p.19.
- 60) ibid. p.39.
- 61) Goodbye to All That p.189.
- 62) Siegfried's Journey p.19.

### Chapter Three

#### COUNTER ATTACK

Between the publication of The Old Huntsman in 1917 and the publication of Sassoon's next volume of poems, Counter Attack and Other Poems, in 1918, Sassoon embarked upon a course of action that he hoped would affect the opinion of the complacent, pro-war public by publicising the terrible plight of soldiers on active service. His <sup>attempt</sup> ~~activities were~~ <sup>was</sup> unsuccessful. He wrote a statement, published in the press, in which he claimed that the war was being prolonged solely for economic reasons, that a negotiated peace could be achieved and that he would not return to duty after the expiry of his leave. He hoped that his consequent court-martial would draw attention to this state of affairs. However, largely due to the efforts of Robert Graves, Sassoon was not court-martialled but sent to a hospital 'to recover,' forfeiting the chance to voice his opinions concerning the conduct of the war.

The events leading up to this protest are worthy of consideration. Sassoon joined the army on August 4th 1914, the day after war had been declared, and was soon commissioned. After he had been sent to France he soon achieved military distinction by his fool-hardy courage and was decorated for bravery. Robert Graves records a typical incident:

... Siegfried distinguished himself by taking, single-handed, a battalion frontage which the Royal Irish Regiment had failed to take the day before. He went over with bombs in daylight, under covering fire from a couple of fifes,

and scared away the occupants... The attack on Mametz Wood had been delayed for two hours because British patrols were still reported to be out. 'British Patrols' were Siegfried and his book of poems... Siegfried had been doing heroic things ever since I left the battalion. His nickname in the Seventh Division was 'Mad Jack.' He won a Military Cross for bringing in a wounded lance-corporal from a mine-crater close to the German lines, under heavy fire. (1)

Shortly after having made Sassoon's acquaintance, Arnold Bennett, a non-combatant, noted in his journal:

He is evidently one of the reckless ones. He said his pals said he always gave the Germans every chance to pot him. He said he would like to go out once more and give them another chance to get him, and come home unscathed. He seemed jealous of the military reputation of poets. He said most of the war was a tedious nuisance, but there are great moments and he would like them again. (2)

The date of Arnold Bennett's entry in his diary - 9th June 1917 - is interesting. Sassoon met Bennett soon after he had been wounded and sent home for the second time. It was at this time that Sassoon began to question the reasons why so many men were killed in such terrible conditions. His growing dissatisfaction with the war manifested itself in various ways; his final action was the result of the union of these various grievances. Sassoon's disaffection was not based on rash impulse but was a lengthy process deriving from his experiences at the front:

...my action was the climax of a progression of ideas and emotions which had begun almost a year before, and that my behaviour was in accordance with the temperament which had led me to perform reckless exploits in the front line. (3)

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This perceptive comment shows how inadequate is Graves division of Sassoon's character into the two extremes of "Happy Warrior" and "Bitter Pacifist." This sort of division is prompted by the <sup>idea</sup> attitude that a brave man must be incapable of pacifism and, should he hold pacifist opinions, must be something else like "bitter." Sassoon was, in fact, attracted by the bravery of certain conscientious objectors, who were frequently treated with brutality by the army:

I hadn't formed any opinion about Conscientious Objectors, but I couldn't help thinking that they must be braver men than some I'd seen wearing uniforms in safe places and taking salutes from genuine soldiers. (4)

Similar feelings of humanity, at this time, towards the brave and active man, soldier or pacifist, rather than towards the coward, drove him to sympathise with the private soldier:

... in 1917 I was only beginning to learn that life, for the majority of the population, is an unlovely struggle against unfair odds, culminating in a cheap funeral. (5)

At first this sympathy prompted Sassoon to try to alleviate the boredom and the sufferings of the men under his command. Robert Graves quotes an example in Goodbye to All That:

... our function would not be to kill Germans, though that might happen, but to make things easier for the men under our command... Siegfried had already shown what he meant. The Fricourt attack was rehearsed over dummy trenches in the back areas until the whole performance, having reached perfection, began to grow stale. Siegfried, ordered to rehearse once more on the day before the attack, led his platoon into a wood and instead read to them - nothing military or literary, just the London Mail. Though the London Mail, a daring new popular weekly, was hardly in

his line, Siegfried thought the men might enjoy the Things We Want to Know column. (6)

This genuine sympathy for the private soldier, already demonstrated in his war poetry, was a strong motive behind Sassoon's protest at the prolongation of the war, and his questioning of the motives of certain groups of non-combatants:

Must the war go on in order that colonels might become brigadiers and brigadiers get Divisions, while contractors and manufacturers enriched themselves, and people in high places ate and drank well and bandied official information and organised entertainments for the wounded? (7)

This question proved unanswerable:

Evidence of civilian callousness and complacency were plentiful, for the thriftless licence of war-time behaviour was an unavoidable spectacle. (8)

A desire to bring these people to some sort of realisation of what the troops were suffering was not sufficient to bring Sassoon to the point of taking an individual stand against the war; there were subjective reasons too. Sassoon had joined the army at the outbreak of war full of patriotic idealism. Faced with the horrors of the fighting in France, he found that the only way to sustain his belief in the war was to "play at being a hero in shining armour." (9) This attempt to glamourise his position proved insufficient and Sassoon became more intent on finding some means of stopping the War as the only alternative to ending it for himself by getting killed. As Graves put it:

Down in Kent he could hear the guns thudding ceaselessly across the Channel, on and on, until he didn't know whether he wanted to go back and die with the first

Battalion, or stay in England and do what he could to prevent the war going on. (10)

He chose the latter course although, had he been passed fit for active service, he might have returned to France. No Board would have sent him back so soon however, so he had plenty of time<sup>in which</sup> to consider his objections to the continuation of the war:

I did... become definitely critical and enquiring about the War. While feeling that my infantry experience justified this, it did not occur to me that I was by no means fully informed on the subject. (11)

Sassoon's acquaintance with Philip and Ottoline Morrell brought him into contact with some prominent pacifists who were entertained at the Morrell's home at Garsington and from whom Sassoon heard some cogent arguments against war. Having determined to examine the possibility of performing some independent and individual action, Sassoon sought the help of H.V. Massingham, editor of The Nation. Describing their meeting in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, Sassoon tells how Markington (a pseudonym for Massingham) supplied him with intellectual arguments to support his rather emotional opposition to the war:

...Markington had gloomily informed me that our Aims were essentially acquisitive, what we were fighting for was the Mesopotamian Oil Wells. A jolly fine swindle it would have been for me, if I'd been killed in April for an Oil Well! But I soon forgot that I'd been unaware of the existence of the Oil Wells before Markington mentioned them, and I conveniently assimilated them as part of my evidential repertoire. (12)

Later, on hearing of Sassoon's intentions, Massingham gave him some good advice:

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Your service at the front would differentiate you from the conscientious objectors. But you must on no account make this gesture - a very fine one if you are really in earnest about it - unless you carry it through effectively. (13)

Firmly convinced that he could "carry it through effectively" Sassoon embarked upon his "independent action." Under the guidance of Bertrand Russell, to whom he was introduced by Massingham, Sassoon wrote a short statement in simple prose, giving his reasons for refusing to serve any more in the army:

I am making\* this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the ~~the~~ War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this War should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be obtainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the War, but against\* the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise. (14)

With Bertrand Russell acting as his "impresario" Sassoon planned his



campaign. When his leave expired at the end of June, he would send this "explosive document" to his Commanding Officer at Litherland Army Camp and await the presumably inevitable court-martial. Edward Lees-Smith, a sympathetic Member of Parliament, promised to ask a question in the House of Commons concerning Sassoon's statement and thus ensure the widest possible publicity. A few days after he had dispatched his letter, a telegram from Litherland ordered him to "Report Immediately." Taking the obvious course, Major Macartney-Filgate, in command during the C.O.'s absence, arranged a Special Medical Board at Crewe in the hope that Sassoon would be found unanswerable for his action. Sassoon was not tempted. Having torn up the instructions concerning the Medical Board together with the accompanying Railway Warrant, Sassoon threw his Military Cross ribbon into the River Mersey. It seemed that nothing could now prevent his being court-martialed and imprisoned.

Needing the solidarity of friends, Sassoon had also sent copies of his "declaration" to Robert Graves and Edward Marsh. Graves records in his autobiography that, although he agreed with Sassoon's opinions and "thought his action magnificently courageous,"<sup>(15)</sup> he felt that his friend was too ill to take the consequences:

... he was in no proper condition to suffer the penalty the letter invited; namely to be court-martialled, cashiered and imprisoned. (16)

Prompted by the generous impulses of friendship, Graves decided to obscure his fellow soldier's "inadequate gesture" (17) and to rescue him from its consequences:

I wrote to the Hon. Evan Morgan... the private secretary to one of the Coalition Ministers. I asked him to do everything possible to prevent the republication of, or comment on, the letter; and arrange that a suitable answer should be given to Mr. Lees-Smith, the leading pacifist Member of Parliament, when he asked a question about it in the House.

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I explained to Evan that I was on Siegfried's side really, but that he should not be allowed to become a martyr to a hopeless cause in his present physical condition. Finally, I wrote to the Third Battalion. I knew that Colonel Jones-Williams was narrowly patriotic, had never been to France, and could not be expected to take a sympathetic view. But the second-in-command, Major Macartney-Filgate, was humane; so I pleaded with him to make the colonel see the affair in a reasonable light. I told him of Siegfried's recent experiences in France and suggested that he should be medically boarded and given indefinite leave. (18)

Having done all this, Graves went to Liverpool in an endeavour to dissuade Sassoon from continuing with his course of action. At the same time he enlisted the aid of Edward Marsh who, as Winston Churchill's private secretary, had once had some influence in the War Office. According to Marsh's biographer, Christopher Hassall, Marsh told Graves that, if Sassoon refused to be medically boarded, he would most certainly be interned in a lunatic asylum. In his own account of this, Sassoon quotes Graves as saying

that the colonel at Clitherland  
(Litherland) had told him to tell me that if I continued to refuse to be medically boarded they would shut me up in a lunatic asylum for the rest of the War. Nothing would induce them to court-martial me. It had all been arranged with some big bug at the War Office in the last day or two. (19)

Deprived of the processes of martyrdom, Sassoon saw no point in continuing with his protest and accepted Graves' organisation of a new medical board. Graves' histrionics at this board, assisted by his own overwrought nerves, won the day. He burst into tears three times while asserting Sassoon's insanity in which he did not in fact believe. Sassoon was consigned to a hospital for war neurasthenics at Craiglockhart - "Dottyville," as he called it - where he came under the care of

Professor W.H.R. Rivers, a prominent Cambridge neurologist, ethnologist and psychologist. This concluded Sassoon's action "in wilful defiance of military authority." The debate in the House of Commons on the question of Sassoon's letter came some days after Sassoon had been sent to Craiglockhart and reflects the amount of activity that had been going on in private. If Sassoon had not been tricked out of continuing with his protest, there seems to be no reason why he should not have been court-martialled. As Sassoon had been persuaded to attend the medical board, Macpherson, replying to Lees-Smith's question, turned the tables by asking whether his Hon. Friend really thought that a "cruel and callous War Office" would martyr a brave and suffering soldier for merely being ill. (20)

Although Graves may have acted from the noblest motives, his intellectual position, as recorded by Sassoon, is indefensible. At one stage of his argument he is quoted as saying:

No-one except people who've been in the real fighting have any right to interfere about the War; and even they can't get anything done about it. All they can do is to remain loyal to one another. And you know perfectly well that most of the conscientious objectors are nothing but skrimshankers.

(21)

This suggests that before one may be permitted to object to a war, or the way it is being conducted, one has to join it. After one has fulfilled this condition, there is nothing that can be done so one must remain in the war out of loyalty to the other combatants who may also object. This incredible dialectic is capped with the usual militarist prejudice against conscientious objectors.

In his own account Graves stresses his conviction that Sassoon was genuinely ill, and, although perfectly sane, was unfit to suffer at the hands of the authorities. Two extracts from Goodbye to All That illustrate his concern for Sassoon's health, the first during the weeks immediately prior to Sassoon's protest:

Back in London now, and very ill, he wrote that often when

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he went for a walk he saw corpses lying about on the pavement.

(22)

and the second, when Graves had successfully persuaded Sassoon to give up his extreme position:

At last, unable to deny how ill he was, Siegfried consented to appear before the medical board. (23)

The official opinion of this medical board was that Sassoon was suffering from a nervous breakdown. Sassoon did in fact experience terrible waking dreams in hospital:

Shapes of mutilated soldiers came crawling across the floor; the floor seemed to be littered with fragments of mangled flesh. Faces glared upwards; hands clutched at neck or belly; a livid grinning face with bristly moustache peered at me above the edge of my bed; his hands clawed at the sheets. Some were like dummy figures used to deceive snipers; others were alive and looked at me reproachfully... (24)

Having endured the terrors of La Fontaine and Aix-la-Croiselle, and then having embarked on the lonelier course of personal protest, Sassoon naturally endured agonising mental tension. However, writing ~~in Siegfried~~ about the board's decision twenty-eight years later, he correctly observes that "people in such a condition (of nervous breakdown) don't usually do things requiring moral courage." (25) To confirm his opinion Sassoon also quotes W.H.R. Rivers' diagnosis given to him on the death of that eminent doctor:

There are no physical signs of any disorder of the nervous system. He discusses his recent actions and their motives in a perfectly intelligent and rational way... His view differs from that of the ordinary pacifist in that he would no longer object to the continuance of the war if he saw any prospect of a rapid decision. (26)

It is quite evident that Sassoon varied between a happy warrior and unhappy mutineer, not between "happy warrior and bitter pacifist" as Graves asserted; his protest was an act of mutiny against the authoritarian regime and arose from humanitarian horror at the waste rather than the employment of soldiers. It was at no time an assertion of pacifist beliefs, although a sympathy for them shaped his thinking.

In the hospital at Craiglockhart, Rivers exerted his influence and experience to destroy Sassoon's conviction of the justice of his protest. From now on the question of personal integrity - whether a man should commit irreparable acts, like killing, if he has sincere doubts as to the purpose and value of those acts - <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ conveniently dropped. According to Sassoon, Rivers preferred to emphasise the weakness of the individual in the widest possible context rather than his strength within the obvious limits. Rivers also held the view that German militarism necessitated a total victory for the Allies. Writing during the Second World War, Sassoon commented:

...in the light of subsequent events it is difficult to believe that a Peace negotiated in 1917 would have been permanent. I share the opinion that nothing on earth would have prevented a recurrence of Teutonic aggressiveness. (27)

The problem of "Teutonic aggressiveness" is one for the historian. However, a large body of opinion holds the view that, had an acceptable peace been negotiated in 1917, or had the Peace of Versailles been less repressive to the Germans, the renewed growth of militarism in the thirties might at least have been retarded.

Consigned to the hospital for war neurasthenics, Sassoon found the leisure and stimulus to write the bulk of the poems that appeared in his next published volume, Counter-Attack. This collection of thirty-nine poems completes the transition from descriptive and journalistic war poetry to the angry, satirical mode. The various accounts of the progress of Sassoon's "independent action" well illustrate the frame of mind which dictated the nature of these poems.

Nonetheless his range is considerably extended and, as a whole the volume makes stimulating and varied reading. In spite of the incisive quality of most of Counter Attack, several poems written later in 1918, begin to betray Sassoon's protest. During his stay at Craiglockhart, Sassoon became more and more reconciled to the idea of war, believing that his fellow soldiers <sup>might</sup> ~~may~~ not after all have died in vain, and something of the tone and language of Absolution as well as "the spirit of 1914" returns to his poems.

A quotation from Henri Barbusse's Le Feu, which first came to Sassoon's notice at Craiglockhart, prefaces the volume. (28) It is a particularly apt passage. Without apology it introduces a poetry that arises directly from the bitter experiences of war and the destruction of moral values and ~~that~~ is expressed tersely in the language of the trenches. Barbusse's reflections on the demoralisation of the troops is followed by Sassoon's own introduction of the actual men involved, in Prelude: The Troops. This poem both establishes the men as human beings and unites them with their experience at the front. Sassoon adopts language that refers to the men and their situation, to describe the weather, and consequently fuses the men with the dawn landscape:

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom  
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals  
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots  
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky  
Haggard and hopeless.

Sassoon's use of language is subtle; he applies vocabulary which should describe the activity of war to periods of inactivity. This implies that, for the soldiers, the stress of waiting is more severe than that of action; the "stale despair of night" must be "beaten down", and with telling irony, the men must

renew

Their desolation in the truce of dawn,  
Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

The image of the murder of an already dying body is a particularly apt

example of Sassoon's imaginative method. Having described the condition of the troops, Sassoon attempts to embrace the "universal" aspects of the situation:

O my brave brown companions, when your souls  
Flock silently away...  
- Death will stand grieving in that field of war  
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.

In combining contrary approaches to the situation described the poem fails to achieve the full effect of either. This detracts from the impact of Counter Attack, the poem which succeeds it in the order of printing.

Counter Attack opens with a brief, colloquial description of the events preceding the poem; the soldiers have taken an enemy trench and are consolidating their position:

We'd gained our first objective hours before  
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,  
Pallid, unshaved and thiraty, blind with smoke.  
Things seemed all right at first. We held their line,  
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,  
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.

These lines have the easy flow of an officer recounting a successful attack to another. As the poem continues with a description of the hideous carnage, corpses tangled together, the language correspondingly becomes more highly wrought:

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps  
And trunks face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.  
And then the rain began - the jolly old rain!

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This opening stanza, which I have quoted in two parts, comprehends the total world of the soldiers in the trenches. The official language of "first objective" and "bombers posted" gives way to the realisation that there is little distinction between the living and the dead and the dead are inferior to sand-bags. Evidently the attack depends on the relative usefulness of death as a prop for the whole operation. The tightly-constructed blank verse and the use of clipped participles as adjectives suggest the noise of sucking mud and the awkward progress of floundering limbs. Finally the whole tediousness of the situation is contained in the concluding irony of the last line; "And then the rain began - the jolly old rain!" The second stanza, enlarging the image linking the dawn to the pale face of the soldier, returns us to the colloquial, almost off-hand language of the opening lines. The poem now concentrates on one man whose fear is vividly realised in awkward mimicry of the contortions of the dead. The whole world seems to be twisted into unnatural, tortured positions and grotesque movement:

Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst  
Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell,  
While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke.  
He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,  
Sick for escape, - loathing the strangled horror  
And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

In the third stanza the enemy stages its counter-attack. The dead seem to come to life; the soldier sees "stumbling figures looming out in front." With barely a chance to defend himself he is hit, and becomes a part of the terrifying squirming movement that involves the whole world:

...then a bang  
Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out  
To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked  
And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,  
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans...



Unifying the poem with devastating irony, Sassoon tags the official report onto the last line; for what it is worth to the soldier, "The counter-attack had failed."

The didacticism of Counter Attack is closely worked into the text; although the lesson is obvious, it achieves impact by being inseparable from the description of a war-time event and the actual horrors involved. There are four main poems in the volume which use this technique - Rear-Guard, Wirers, Attack and Trench Duty. Together, these show a more mature working of the themes and method of such poems as Working Party and In The Pink. The incidents described in these four poems are carefully selected and related to the reaction of a normal human being, the poet himself or any man. Any social attitude that arises from this technique is contained in the sense of the poem and inseparable from it.

The Rear-Guard deals with Sassoon's experience in the Hindenburg tunnel that is fully described in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer (29). While searching for his headquarters, Sassoon vainly endeavoured to persuade a corpse to show him the way. The power of the poem comes from the contrast between the reaction of a living man to the situation and the inertia of a corpse, a "thing" that is blank and destroyed. If it has any significance, the body presages the destruction of all human values. The irony of the situation is expressed by the fact that the body is initially referred to as a living creature, as the poet assumes it to be:

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie  
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,  
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.

With the realisation that "the sleeper" is dead comes the change of description. "Someone" becomes a "soft, unanswering heap" and the reader is brought to observe the thin division in war between living and dying, yet the enormous gulf between Life and Death.

The bewildering ironies of this state of affairs are again expressed in the poem Trench Duty. A raid on the "Boche" is made and someone is sniped. A sense of the arbitrariness of this tedious and

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futile killing drifts lamely into the poet's dazed ~~consciousness~~ consciousness. The staccato phrases of the soldiers and the state of the sky are hurried through on rapid iambic pentameters to assemble fragments of experience which cannot be quickly assimilated:

'What? Stretcher-bearers wanted? Someone killed?'

Five minutes ago I heard a sniper fire:

Why did he do it?... Starlight overhead -

Blank stars. I'm wide-awake; and some chap's dead.

Fine sensibility is irrelevant on these occasions; there are no moral referends in the trenches by which to judge such things as miscellaneous and arbitrary deaths. Although Sassoon's method is too direct here to be as successful as that of the more highly wrought poems or the more bitterly polemical verses, the devices of alliteration and caesura react upon the subject-matter to intensify the protest.

In Attack the structure of the poem is ponderous and cumbersome, weighed down by the trappings of war:

Then, clumsily bowed

With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,

Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.

The whole attack lurches forward in this manner leaving behind the only possible ally, "hope", to flounder in the mud. The only agonised product of this attack is the futile and unanswered plea - "O Jesus, make it stop!"

This plea is repeated in To Any Dead Officer, one ~~of~~ of Sassoon's more successful pieces in the conversational style which originated with the poems The Daffodil Murderer and The Old Huntsman. It was written while he was engaged in writing his "declaration" and the description in Siegfried's Journey of the circumstances under which it was written, is of interest:

It was for the fighting men that my appeal was made, for those whose loyalty and unthinkingness would have been betrayed, whatever acquisitions the Peace might bring to the British Empire. I went back to the statement on the table with fortified conviction that I was doing right. Perhaps the dead were backing me up, I thought; for I was a believer in spiritual presences... The words came into my head quite naturally. And by the time I went to bed I had written a slangy, telephonic poem of forty lines. I called it To Any Dead Officer, but it was addressed to one whom I had known during both my periods of service in France. Poignant though the subject was, I wrote it with a sense of mastery and detachment, and when it was finished I felt that it anyhow testified to the sincerity of my protest. (30)

As Sassoon observes, the poem sounds like a fragmented telephone conversation addressed to a friend who had been "Knocked over in some hopeless dud-attack." The depth of emotion, largely obscured by the chattiness of the greater part of the poem, is revealed in the final stanza which concludes the one-sided conversation, with a message for God:

Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God,  
And tell Him that our Politicians swear  
They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod  
Under the Heel of England... Are you there?...  
Yes... and the war won't end for at least two years:  
But we've got stacks of men...

In this stanza Sassoon has combined several ideas and judgements in a few lines. The notion that God is on "our" side, the callous bunglings of politicians, the lives wasted in a futile cause, all spill on top of each other in a welter of jingoistic cliches gabbled into the phone. Then, for an instant, the genuine emotion breaks through - "...I'm blind with tears,/ Staring into the dark."- followed by the concluding irony expressed in the slang of the subalterns:

Cheero!

I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.

Concern for one's fellow officers was not classified as conduct unbefitting a gentleman; friendship for the ranks was not encouraged. Two poems deal with Sassoon's attitude as a Second Lieutenant to the men under his command. The Dream describes the friendliness that could exist between the platoon and its commanders:

They can still grin at me, for each of 'em knows  
That I'm as tired as they are...

Sassoon continues to describe the feelings of pride and pity he feels for the men. It seems likely that Sassoon was something of an exception among the officers in this respect. Graves' testifies to Sassoon's and incidentally his own concern for the privates. ~~(30)~~ Frank Richards, who was at one stage in Sassoon's platoon comments in his book, Old Soldiers Never Die, "it was only once in a blue moon that we had an officer like Mr. Sassoon." <sup>(31)</sup> We are treated to a description of some of Sassoon's other privates in Twelve Months After, "Young Gibson", "Morgan", "Hughes" and the rest. "Young Hughes" was killed during the wiring operation in Wirers. As for the others:

'Old soldiers never die; they simply fide away!'  
That's what they used to sing along the roads last spring;  
That's what they used to say before the push began;  
That's where they are today, knocked over to a man.

Wirers is an example of Sassoon's use of the satiric epigram that first made its appearance in poems like Blighters and They in The Old Huntsman. Many of the remaining poems in Counter Attack use this method in varying degrees but it is not style that unites the poems in this volume. Sassoon uses scenes from trench-life to re-enforce his attack on the corruption, ignorance and callous brutality of civilians shrinking from the truth, of those in positions of authority like the

Generals and Politicians and of those who could wield ~~power~~ influence like the Bishops and Journalists.

Sassoon's first weapon is the discrepancy between the condition of the soldiers abroad and the view held of them by the civilians at home and the terrible ironies involved in making any sort of comparison between the two. Dreamers makes this comparison in what seems to be the mildest of manners:

Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin  
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,  
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,  
Dreaming ~~with~~ of things they did with balls and bats,  
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain  
Bank-holidays, and picture shows and spats,  
And going to the office in the train.

The gentle ~~system~~ <sup>rhythm</sup> and simple alternate rhymes unify the two conditions of the men; they, after all, have not changed. Consequently, the more one considers this poem, the more one realises how grotesque is the conjunction of "foul dug-outs" with cricket and spats, and how ironic it is that the soldiers' wildest dreams should be for the simplest and dullest things.

In Lamentations the crazed grief, rather than the unresolvable longings, of a man is contrasted with the implicit figure of the happy warrior. The cause of the man's distress is related casually because one death, or one grief, is not of much account in a world that has lost all humanitarian feeling:

... he howled and beat his chest.  
And all because his brother had gone west,  
Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief  
Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling  
Half-naked on the floor. In my belief  
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

It is interesting to compare the same incident described in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer. Here Sassoon adopts the same laconic manner, but does not use the incident to arm himself for the fight against civilian complacency: In this account the man is "naked to the waist" rather than "half-naked" which suggests something else; he is "clutching" rather than "beating" his chest; and his howling is "uncouth" rather than indicative of a terrible wrong. The prose account supplies other details which Sassoon terms "depressing". (32)

No poet had ever described war in such ferocious and acute detail. Yet pure description, however vivid, was insufficient for Sassoon's purposes. He did not desire merely to bring the realities of trench-life home with him on leave; he wished to disturb the complacent slumbers and peaceful dinners of the smug civilians with these horrors, to force them to realise the ghastly fate to which they casually consigned their country's youth. His second weapon in this struggle was to gaze with satirical scrutiny on certain civilian types - fathers, for instance, in The Fathers, who pretend that their sons regard warfare as a jolly occasion for besporting themselves:

One of them said: 'My eldest lad  
Writes cheery letters from Bagdad.  
But Arthur's getting all the fun  
At Arras with his nine-inch gun.'

'Yes,' wheezed the other, 'that's the luck!  
My boy's quite broken-hearted, stuck  
In England training all this year,

...

I watch them toddle through the door -  
These impotent old friends of mine.

The contrast between Arthur, "getting all the fun" with his "nine-inch gun" and the impotence of the fathers bitterly suggests the vicarious pleasure the old men derive from the war-time activities of their sons. The rhyme and metre are those of a cautionary tale capturing the

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quality of the voices of the old man.

Remorse is a poem which treats the same theme from the point of view of the son who in the middle of active service spares a thought for his father. He remembers

how he saw those Germans run,  
Screaming for mercy among the stumps of trees:  
Green-faced, they dodged and darted: there was one  
Livid with terror, clutching at his knees...  
Our chaps were sticking 'em like pigs... 'O Hell!'  
He thought - 'there's things in war one dare not tell  
Poor father sitting safe at home, who reads  
Of dying heroes and their deathless deeds.'

The language here is perfectly fitted to its occasion. The graphic description of what "poor father" takes to be "deathless deeds" - the hacking ("stumps of trees") and butchering ("sticking 'em like pigs") - are ironically merely concerned with death and defy the father's disbelief. As a typical example of what was euphemistically known as the "offensive spirit" the poem adds another chronicle to the behaviour of the happy warrior.

Ignorance of the soldier's plight is not confined to the older civilians. In Song Books of the War "Adventurous lads" of the future whose "hearts will kindle for the fight" are viewed with a cynicism that is largely retrospective. These youths of the future are described in the glowing terms of early war poetry and Sassoon uses the language of Absolution ironically:

They'll envy us the dazzling times  
When sacrifice absolved our earth.

In the second stanza he combines typical happy warrior war-sentiment with his <sup>new</sup> ~~real~~ concept of war. An "ancient man" speaks of the war and wonders that any escaped alive "Out of the shambles..." His youthful audience however, thinks that "'Poor grandad's day is done'" and positively envies

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those "lads" who, at their age, "lived in time to share the fun." These young men who regret having missed the "fun" are the same as those who joined up in the "spirit of 1914" to become degraded and wretched human beings, whose sacrifice and suffering ~~was~~<sup>is</sup> scarcely noticed by those for whom it was made and endured. This is simply expressed in Suicide in the Trenches where a "simple soldier boy" becomes "cowed and glum" in the trenches and ~~shots~~ himself. The "smug-faced crowds" are told to

Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

Here the ballad metre and style are well-suited to the unheroic tale of a latter-day "soldier-boy."

Suicides or self-inflicted wounds were commonplace on the Western Front. The brutal callousness of the people at home and their ignorance of these affairs shocked Sassoon more than the demoralisation of the troops. Does it Matter? is one of his most bitter attacks on civilian indifference. In three five-line stanzas, Sassoon reveals the futility of being wounded for the sake of others, in terms of their indifferent response which masquerades as kindness:

Does it matter? - losing your sight?...  
There's such splendid work for the blind;  
And people will always be kind...

The language and rhythm of the poem capture the hectoring, sympathetic accents of the do-gooder.

Three poems deal with the attitude of women to the war and to their soldier husbands, sons and lovers. Two of these are directly antagonistic towards the female representatives of the callous civilian populace. Glory of Women deals with the selfish delight of women in war, or rather in their conception of the war which omits to notice anything which might be termed "nasty." Here the lines are longer than those of Does it Matter? and force the point home with hard rhymes:



You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,  
Or wounded in a mentionable place.

The poem concludes with a fearful image of the British "heroes" trampling the face of a German mother's son "deeper in the mud." Their Frailty is a more important poem. Here Sassoon shows how little the women seem to care for humanity; their only concern is for their own relations, not for the suffering of others:

Husbands and sons and lovers; everywhere  
They die; War bleeds us white.  
Mothers and wives and sweethearts, - they don't care  
So long as He's all right.

The nearest any woman comes, in Sassoon's poems, to comprehending the anguish of her soldier is the mother in The Hawthorn Tree. Her life is troubled by the plight of her "lad that's out in France." Consequently her delight in the tree and in the lane leading to the house is diminished by her realisation of the immense contrast between ~~that~~ and her son's longing for home:

Not much to me is yonder lane  
Where he so longs to tread:  
But when there's been a shower of rain  
I think I'll never weep again  
Until I've heard he's dead.

The military authorities were not exempted from the scorn of Sassoon's pen. Base Details expands the image of "screaming, scarlet majors" with which Robert Ross, his great friend and poetic impressario, used to express his disgust at their conduct of the war. Bitterly, the poet puts himself in their position:

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,

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I'd live with scarlet majors at the Base,  
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.  
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,  
Guzzling and gulping at the best hotel,  
Reading the Roll of Honour.

The contrast between the "glum heroes" and the "scarlet majors" needs no further elaboration; Sassoon, with typical accuracy, pictures the officers at their most publicly offensive activity with a devastating accumulation of adjectives: "fierce", "bald", "short of breath", "scarlet", "puffy", "petulant". The concluding lines of this poem rely for their effect on the supposition that the majors believe that they are "doing their bit" even though the war is a lengthy series of military blunders and wastage of life:

And when the war is done and youth stone dead,  
I'd toddle safely home and die in bed.

The tactics of the General and his staff in The General are treated with no more deference than the Majors at the Base. In the seven lines of this poem Sassoon compresses the whole situation of the British Army at the Front Line, its experience, slangy conversation and colossal losses.

'Good-morning; good-morning!' the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,  
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
'He's a cheery old card,' grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

. . .

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

8 Sassoon wrote several poems about the collusion of Church and State in the prolongation of the war and on the inadequacy of religious consolation. The religious feelings of many soldiers were betrayed by

the Church which used its doctrines to further the ~~cause~~<sup>cause</sup>. In this way the church hierarchy proved its own dogmas to be hollow and preached politics under the guise of religion. Many multiple tombs in the French countryside testify to the alliance of Church and State in the furtherance and perpetuation of the "just war". The Investiture demonstrates Sassoon's dissatisfaction with the austere comforts of traditional religion when they are compared with the physical and companionable pleasures that are youth's due. The poem is addressed to a dead comrade who is "homesick" and "discontented."

If I were there we'd snowball Death with skulls;  
Or ride away to hunt in Devil's wood  
With ghosts of puppies that we walked of old.  
But you're alone; and solitude annuls  
Our earthly jokes; and strangely wise and good  
You roam forlorn along the streets of gold.

How to die illustrates in two stanzas, the difference between the supposed "Christian" death and the reality of dying in combat. In an apocalyptic blaze of light, the first stanza describes the ecstasies of the dying man:

He lifts his fingers towards the skies  
Where holy brightness breaks in flame;  
Radiance reflected in his eyes,  
And on his lips a whispered name.

The second stanza sarcastically adopts a defence of the first, quoting blatant fact only as examples of the impossible, inconceivable method of dying. That he should be discussing methods of dying adds a further layer of irony:

You'd think, to hear some people talk,  
That lads go West with sobs and curses,

...

But they've been taught the way to do it

Like Christian soldiers; not with haste  
And shuddering groans; but passing through it  
With due regard for decent taste.

The alternate weak and strong rhymes give the poem a sense of suppressed fury; where the rhyme is weak, the words in the line fail to conform to the rhythm and awkward three-syllable participles disrupt the easy flow of the verse; where the rhyme is strong, so is the rhythm.

The final group of bitter, satirical, poems involves the journalists, some of whom deliberately concealed the truth about the war from the public; they filled the pages of their newspapers with anti-German, pro-war propaganda and distorted the casualty figures. In The Effect Sassoon prefaces the poem with the typical reportage of the War Correspondant:

'The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before.'

The poem concerns the real experiences of the man whose speech is supposedly reported:

'He'd never seen so many dead before.'  
The tilting words danced up and down his brain,  
While corpses jumped and capered in the rain.  
No, no; he wouldn't count them any more...

Here a chance sentence becomes a catch-phrase because of its rhythmical qualities: the echoes of a nightmare. The third verse is a good example of Sassoon's ability to fuse the slack and lazy expressions of ordinary speech with accurate observation:

When Dick was killed last week he looked like that,  
Flapping along the fire-step like a fish,  
After the blazing crump had knocked him flat...

This fish image is perpetuated in the following and concluding lines with the hysterical irony of one who has endured such horrors:

'How many dead? As many as ever you wish.

Don't count 'em; they're too many.

Who'll buy my nice fresh corpses, two a penny?

Editorial Impressions, a poem about "the camouflage War which was manufactured by the press," paints a cynical portrait of an editor writing a book called 'Europe on the Rack' based on notes made during a whistle-stop tour of the trenches. The implications of Fight to a Finish are more sinister. Having fought and won the war, the "boys come back, " but not to rest on their laurels. The journalists, the "Yellow-Pressmen," turn out to cheer those soldiers who had politely "refrained from dying." The soldiers take their revenge, first on those responsible for publishing falsehoods and then on the real enemy, the politicians. Bernard Bergonzi has written a perceptive critique of this poem:

In such poems as this - whose verbal accomplishment seems to me admirable - one is, I think, made aware of the inherent limits of Sassoon's (and perhaps any) satirical approach: the complexities of actual experience are reduced to a single satisfying gesture ( and a phrase like 'the soldiers who refrained from dying' suggests that the anti-heroic mode, just as much as the heroic, can achieve its effects too easily). (38)

Bergonzi's disapprobation of the phrase, "those soldiers who refrained from dying" suggests that the process of reduction is denied to the poet. The effect of the phrase obviously depends on the word "refrained." Some soldiers, after all, had been sufficiently careful not to offend civilian and journalistic sensibilities or to rob those at home of the illusion of victory; that, says Sassoon with devastating irony, is the essence of good taste. One can imagine soldiers politely dodging bullets

and graciously avoiding shells in order to provide a decent victory march. As Bergonzi points out, Sassoon's method is selective and ~~its~~ <sup>the poem</sup> effect is that of a "satisfying gesture"; but the poem is also intended to be a bitter fantasy set in opposition to the fantasies of the press whose glorification of the war angered Sassoon.

Sassoon describes his stay at Craiglockhart in Sherston's Progress and in Siegfried's Journey his opportune meeting with Wilfrid Owen there. Owen found in Sassoon the sympathy and intellectual stimulus that he needed. Although Owen had already written poems like Exposure and Anthem for Doomed Youth, Sassoon encouraged him towards a more colloquial style and provided him with "a lively incentive during his rapid advance to self-revelation." (34)

Meanwhile, Rivers was gradually directing Sassoon's withdrawal from his personal stand against the war. This process culminated in Sassoon's request to be passed fit once more for active service. In his prose autobiographies Sassoon does not probe very deeply into his motives underlying this new action. In Sherston's Progress he suggests that the force of his feeling for the soldiers, whose sufferings were unaffected by his personal attempt to alleviate them, prompted him to return to the fighting. To him the men "were more ~~than~~" than all the despairing and war-weary civilians. <sup>(35)</sup> Since the authorities had neutered his protest, Sassoon began to feel that his absence from the war was now being prolonged by false pretences and was therefore unjustified:

...some inward monitor became uncomfortably candid and remarked "This heroic gesture of yours - "making a separate peace" - is extremely convenient for you, isn't it? Doesn't it begin to look rather like dodging the Kaiser's well-aimed projectiles?"

...

Against this I argued that, having pledged myself to an uncompromising attitude, I ought to remain consistent to the abstract idea that war was wrong. Intellectual sobriety was demanded of me. But the trouble was that I wasn't an

'intellectual' at all; I was only trying to become one. (36)

Frustration at the impotence he had acquired by his 'independent action' seemed to be another forceful motive behind Sassoon's decision to return to the scenes of action, and he was annoyed by people who pitied him or thought him abnormal:

How else could I get my own back on them but by returning to the trenches? Killed in action in order to confute the Under-Secretary for War, who had officially stated that I wasn't responsible for my actions. What a truly glorious death for a promising young pacifist..! (37)

Several poems, published in CounterAttack deal directly with Sassoon's mental agonies endured during this time. ~~The first,~~ Dead Musicians, <sup>had</sup> was written shortly after Sassoon/returned from France and concerns his stay in hospital recovering from his second wound. Graves' description of Sassoon at this time is apposite:

...if he could only be quiet and see no-one, simply watch the trees dressing up in green and feel the same himself. He was beastly weak and in a rotten state of nerves. A gramophone in the ward plagued him beyond endurance. (38)

In the first stanza of Dead Musicians, Sassoon recalls his early, pre-war poetry in which he attempted to capture the harmonies and ecstasies of music:

From you, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart,  
The substance of my dreams took fire.

In the second stanza, Sassoon appears as the "mystic" soldier who was encountered in earlier poems and who now wears "a wreath of banished lives." These allusions are deliberate; Sassoon's image of himself as a soldier was shattered and the great musicians that he once loved, have

no part in war; their works fail to bring dead friends to memory. This rather staid poem dissolves in the third and final stanza into colloquial reality expressed in the contrast between the solid rhythms of the verses concerned with classical music and the hysterical beat of 'rag-time.' It is by the agency of this music that Sassoon can recall his dead friends:

With fox-trot tunes their ghosts I charm.  
'Another little drink won't do us any harm.'  
I think of rag-time; a bit of rag-time;  
And see their faces crowding round  
To the sound of the syncopated beat.  
They've got such jolly things to tell,  
Home from hell with a blighty wound so neat...

. . . L . . .

And so the song breaks off; and I'm alone.  
 They're dead... For God's sake stop that gramophone.

A more successful poem on the theme of recovering from the shock of fighting is Repression of War Experience. This is a highly wrought poem and is carefully planned although its ~~erith~~ structure has been criticised. Rather than progressing from serenity to agony, Sassoon deliberately pitches the reader into an obvious analogy to which he returns later in the poem:

Now light the candles; one, two; there's a moth;  
 What silly beggars they are to blunder in  
 And scorch their wings with gory, liquid flame -  
 No, no, not that, - it's bad to think of war,  
 When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you;

Throughout the poem a fearful introspection weaves between the games and past-times with which the disturbed man attempts to distract himself; he invents topics for contemplation in a wild attempt to control the "ugly" thoughts that plague him. Yet whatever he thinks about, the objects of his thoughts are expressed in terms reminiscent of war: the roses seem



to be wounded; the books, bound in the colours of battle-dress, are a "jolly company" standing, like the troops, "so quiet and patient on the shelves." As books they offer no relief and the man's consciousness focusses on one nerve-shattering moth that "bumps and flutters" like a wounded man. Ghosts in the garden begin to worry him:

... horrible shapes in shrouds - old men who died  
Slow, natural deaths, - old men with ugly souls,  
Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

Finally, the agony that he has been trying to control, yet that has pervaded the poem, breaks out:

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;  
You'd never think there was a bloody war on!..  
O yes, you would... why, you can hear the guns.  
Hark! Thud, thud, thud, - quite soft... they never cease -  
Those whispering guns - O Christ, I want to go out  
And screech at them to stop - I'm going crazy;  
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

The transition in this extract from the second person singular in which the poet talks to himself with a queer horror represents the victory of the war experience over the mind; the poet changes to the first person as the stark oppression of the "whispering guns" drives itself into his awareness. Within the blank verse structure Sassoon mingles the repetitive key words - "you", "I" and "guns"-with the hackneyed assertions of impending madness to show the futility of this mental suffering.

As Sassoon recovered from the strain of the war and began to see his way to return to France, his protest forgotten, his poems reflect his state of mind. The Petrarchan Sonnet, Banishment gives "love" as the underlying and unifying motive in Sassoon's actions:

Love drove me to rebel.

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Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;  
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

Sassoon felt that only by being one with the soldiers could he record their sufferings and rid himself of the taint of civilian life, yet the language of the poems written at this time resembles that of his first war poems - Absolution, To My Dead Brother and To Victory. Sick Leave appeals to a sense of mystical comradeship with the question: "Are they not still your brothers through our blood?" This is close to Absolution:

...having claimed this heritage of heart,  
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?

The opening of Sick Leave refers to the dead as "homeless ones" and parallels the opening lines of the second stanza of The Dragon and the Undying where the "homeless" are "vocal" rather than "noiseless." The "Dragon" of war becomes the "Foul Beast of war that bludgeons life" in The Dream which was also written in a mood of nostalgia for the trenches. Even in the poem Autumn, Sassoon avoids strict realism and describes the death of men in battle in terms of the leaves falling. The only analogy is in the numbers:

                    Their lives are like the leaves  
Scattered in flocks of ruin, tossed and blown  
Along the westering furnace flaring red.

In Invocation, Thrushes and Together Sassoon totally reverts to his pre-war manner. Invocation contains all the apparatus of Sassoon's idealised Kentish countryside where the cock crows "across some valley dim/ With whispering trees." The "glades" are "deep-ranked with flowers that gleam and shake" and the "golden silence" is "hung with green." Through the agency of this "beauty that has been" Sassoon hopes to return to the former, happy frame of mind in which he wrote his early poems. In Thrushes he contrasts the thrush's physical occupation of the "emptiness of light", with man's attempt to "storm the gate of nothingness" with his heart, in order to shape the "nothingness" into signific-

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ance. The close association of dawn with man's most unique moments of experience in this poem is typical of Sassoon's early work. Together looks back to the hunting experience of Sassoon's youth: As the

...watery fields grow brown and dim,  
And hounds have lost their fox, and horses tire,

we are reminded of Nimrod in September and a nostalgia for all that had been obliterated by the war, pervades the poem.

Counter Attack was published by Heinemann in June 1918. Sassoon writes about its reception by the public in Siegfried's Journey:

Some of the reviewers were pained and indignant at my insistence on the ugly aspects of war. Robbie, however, when bringing press-cuttings, assured me that a hostile notice often did more good than an adulatory one. Anyhow there was no doubt that Counter Attack, in its blood-red and yellow paper cover, was being bought and discussed. (39)

Heinemann had asked Sassoon to "include some amiable stuff to mitigate the horrors" but had been persuaded to sell it as a short, half-crown book which proved its worth by selling 5,000 copies in four printings between June 1918 and June 1919. In America, the book went through three printings between December 1918 and February 1920. The American edition contained an introduction by Robert Nichols, describing Sassoon as having "the air of a sullen falcon" -

He speaks slowly, enunciating the words as if they pained him, in a voice that has something of the troubled thickness apparent in the voices of those who emerge from a deep grief... One would think he communed with himself, save that, at the pauses, he shoots a powerful glance at the listener. (40)

The public and critical reaction to Counter Attack was much the same as to the war poems in The Old Huntsman. Most of the derogatory criticism

was of the Edmund Gosse kind, which strove to condemn a war poetry which it found tasteless. John Middleton Murry produced a more interesting attack on Sassoon's poetry in The Nation. It begins:

It is the fact, not the poetry, of Mr. Sassoon that is important. When a man is in torment and cries aloud, his cry is incoherent. It has neither weight nor meaning of its own. It is inhuman, and its very inhumanity strikes to the nerves of our hearts. (41)

Murry continues to argue that a poet should convey harmony to the reader by comparison with discord but that Sassoon merely conveys discord by itself. Murry concludes that the reader must postulate the harmony in the world by which to compare Sassoon's presentation of discord and that therefore "it is Mr. Sassoon who is the martyr, and we ourselves who are the poets."

Whether Murry's contention is valid or not, this reversal of rôles was not Sassoon's intention; he intended to recreate the world of war as it appeared to him and to present that to the reader. Murry, oversimplifying the poets' task, hoped to see order imposed on what, to Sassoon was essentially chaotic. Sassoon's approach was direct; he described what he witnessed: if there was chaos it was not invented by the man whose early poems express nothing but the harmony of nature. The order lies in the versification, the selection and arrangement of Sassoon's material which brings coherence to what might otherwise have been "the inarticulate sounds of a man in torment."

In his article, The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon, Joseph Cohen asserts that Murry's article is "strong literary censure." He adds his own disapprobation of Sassoon's war poems:

It must be recognised in retrospect, that Sassoon's war poetry suffered from his indulging too much in the rôle of prophet, for once he decided that it was proper for him, he entered upon the rôle with so much exuberance that he

permanently damaged his reputation as a poet. True, he pleaded effectively for the combatants and just as effectively castigated those whom he held responsible for the sufferings of the soldiers. But his verse pleadings and remonstrances reduced his efforts to political propaganda . (42)

Sassoon, collecting his war poems in 1919, called his volume "a tract against war" and it would be futile to deny the propagandist element in his poetry. If opposition to the privilege enjoyed and the lies and bungling perpetrated by those who wielded power and influence is "political" then a large portion of Sassoon's war poetry is "political propaganda." However, there is no reason why the humanitarian impulse, the prime motive behind Sassoon's war poetry, should necessarily "reduce" that poetry. Sassoon may, as Cohen points out, have lacked the "compassion" of Wilfrid Owen but his subject was not the "Pity of War"; it was the Violence, the Agony and the overwhelming Futility of it.

The controversial nature of Sassoon's subject-matter has also provoked adverse criticism; H.V. Routh's is a fairly typical example:

His earliest war pieces do not lack a sober sense of heroism, but in his disillusioned period he felt that literary refinements would mislead both the poet and his audience, whereas violent, foul-mouthed expressions would surprise the public into visualising life, and especially death, at the Front. So he exposed the bestial and mechanised inhumanities of the trenches with too much technical effectiveness and thereby missed his full effects. His coarse or silly blasphemies often blind the reader to the deep sympathy they imply. (43)

This passage raises several points. The lack of "literary refinement" presumably encompasses the sometimes rough-made qualities of Sassoon's verse, as well as the use of "violent, foul-mouthed expressions." Obviously Sassoon uses roughness as a technique, largely for the reasons

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Routh suggests; but there is no reason why this should detract from the value of the poems. The outspoken qualities of the poems derive from the impact of the war on Sassoon's sensibilities as I have traced it, but their success can be partly explained in terms of literary history. Rupert Brooke's poems were frequently attacked by critics like Gosse for similar reasons; at the same time Edward Marsh felt that this was part of the "new strength" of some of the poems he read, although he tended to select the more "refined" pieces for his anthology.

The accusation of "blasphemy" is more interesting, although it is really an irrelevance. Sassoon had shown the Church to be worldly and corrupt. This worldliness and corruption obscured its basic myth which failed to provide the men in the trenches with adequate spiritual compensation. Men are not debased by blaspheming against a God whose only manifestation is a debased church. (Blasphemy, after all, can obscure nothing; it is itself a symptom). The best example of this is Stand-to: Good Friday Morning ~~where~~ where the miserable parody of a peace-time Church Parade is a fact, not a fiction.

Lastly, Sassoon's coarseness and "foul-mouthed expressions" are those of the trenches. Owen makes an adequate comment in his poem Apologia Pro Poemate Meo:

I have perceived much beauty

In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight. (44)

As Sassoon can capture the voice of the aggressive "do-gooder" in a poem like Does it Matter or the superficial chatter of a Subaltern, so can he capture the rough protest from the mouth of the common soldier (without the patronising dialect of Kipling) in whose voice is an eloquent appeal.

Footnotes to Chapter Three

- 1) Goodbye to All That p.174.
- 2) The Journals of Arnold Bennett entry for 9th June, 1917.
- 3) Siegfried's Journey p.56.
- 4) Memoirs of An Infantry Officer (Faber & Faber, London, 1930) p.125.
- 5) ibid. p.147.
- 6) Goodbye to All That p.192.
- 7) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer p.221.
- 8) ibid. p.205.
- 9) ibid. p.143.
- 10) Goodbye to All That p.212.
- 11) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer p.176.
- 12) ibid. p.197.
- 13) ibid. p. 199.
- 14) ibid. p.218.
- 15) Goodbye to All That p.214.
- 16) ibid. p.214.
- 17) ibid. p.214.
- 18) ibid. p.214.
- 19) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer p.234.
- 20) Hansard's Parliamentary Debates entry for 30th. July 1917.
- 21) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer p.233.
- 22) Goodbye to All That p.211.
- 23) ibid. p.216.
- 24) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer p.175.
- 25) Siegfried's Journey p. 56.

- 26) ibid. p.64.
- 27) ibid. p.57.
- 28) Counter-Attack (Heinemann, London, 1918) quoted in French.

In the uneasy truce of that afternoon, these men who had been tortured by tiredness, lashed by rain, distressed through a whole night of thunder, these survivors of volcanoes and floods, realised dimly at what stage war, as shocking to the mind as to the body, not only outrages good sense, debases great ideas, fosters all crimes - but they thought over how it had developed in them and around them all the bad instincts without the exception of any; spitefulness becoming cruelty, selfishness becoming barbarity, the need for diversion becoming madness. (my translation)

- 29) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer p.159.
- 30) Siegfried's Journey p.54.
- 31) (Faber & Faber, London, 1964) p.271.
- 32) Memoirs of an Infantry Officer p.119.
- 33) Heroes' Twilight p.106.
- 34) Siegfried's Journey p.60.
- 35) Sherston's Progress (Faber & Faber, London, 1936) p.31.
- 36) ibid. p.51.
- 37) ibid. p.57.
- 38) Goodbye to All That p.212.
- 39) Siegfried's Journey p.69.
- 40) (Dutton, New York, 1918) introduction pp. 1-8.
- 41) Mr. Sassoon's War Verses , The Nation July 13th 1918.
- 42) The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon, Tulane Studies in English Vol. VII (Tulane University, New Orleans, 1957)
- 43) English Literature and Ideas in the Twentieth Century (London, 1946)
- 44) The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen (Chatto & Windus, London, 1931) p.39.



## Chapter Four

### PICTURE SHOW

The popularity of Counter Attack established Sassoon as one of the best-known and most widely read of the war poets. It is not surprising that in 1919 he sought to consolidate his reputation rather than to advance it by publishing a large amount of new work. It is perhaps for this reason that the 200 copies of his next volume of poems, Picture Show were printed privately for the author in June and not reprinted in England as an ordinary edition. Only a minority of the poems in Picture Show were war poems, of which nine appeared in the attractive War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, issued in October. This was a pocket-sized "tract against war" bound in bright red cloth; it reprinted Sassoon's best war poems and contained three new war poems, In An Underground Dressing Station, Atrocities and Return of the Heroes which had appeared in no other volume. Excluding the contribution to War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon, only nine of the Picture Show poems were reprinted in ordinary English Editions until the first volume of Collected Poems, published in 1947. The American edition of Picture Show was published in 1920 with the addition of seven poems and it is this edition which is reproduced in the Collected Poems.

Most of the Picture Show poems were written in 1918. Having been passed fit for active service, Sassoon left Craiglockhart and was sent to Ireland where he managed to indulge his pleasure in fox-hunting. In February he was transported to France and thence to Palestine despite his efforts to be sent back to the Western Front. It was not long, however, before his battalion was shipped back across the Mediterranean to Marseilles.

Two poems, Concert Party and Night on the Convoy, describe

Sassoon's experiences in Palestine and Egypt. It is interesting to compare them with the prose record; Sassoon based many of his poems on experiences noted in his diary. Four months of the diary covering the period of active service in the Near East are printed in Sherston's Progress: Concert Party is based on the entry for April 23rd 1918, and a comparison between the prose and the poetic accounts provides an interesting insight into Sassoon's method; he selects his material from the prose account according to the dictates of the verse pattern. In this case the prose more effectively evokes the nostalgia and home-sickness of the troops with their "Blighty hunger" and their longing for the "gaiety and sentiment of life" and provides a more solid contrast to the civilians entertaining them with a second-rate repertoire on a make-shift stage:

... a canvas awning; a few footlights; two blue-chinned actors in soft felt hats - one of them jangling rag-time tunes on a worn-out upright; three women in short silk skirts singing the old, old soppy popular songs... It was as though these civilians were playing to an audience of the dead and the living - men and ghosts who had crowded in like moths to a lamp. One by one they had stolen back till the crowd seemed limitlessly extended. And there, in that half-lit oasis of Time, they listen to 'Dixieland' and 'It's a long, long trail,' and 'I hear you calling me.' But it was the voice of life that 'joined in the chorus, boys'; and very powerful and impressive it sounded. (1)

The less explicit Concert Party fails to convey the "impressive" quality<sup>ies</sup> of the scene and Sassoon cannot resist ironically apostrophising the singers:

O sing us the songs, the songs of our own land,  
You warbling ladies in white.

His poem rather conveys the submissive home-sickness of the men:

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Jaded and gay, the ladies sing; and the chap in brown  
Tilts his grey hat; jaunty and lean and pale,  
He rattles the keys... some actor bloke from town...  
God send you home; and then A long, long trail;  
I hear you calling me; and Dixieland...  
Sing slowly... now the chorus... one by one  
We hear them, drink them; till the concert's done.

Silent, I watch the shadowy mass of soldiers stand.  
Silent, they drift away, over the glimmering sand.

The lines of Concert Party are lengthened or shortened by the almost haphazard occurrence of rhyme. Night on the Convoy rattles along in ten-syllable iambic lines recalling the steady throb of the ship's engines, until the concluding line breaks this rhythm by giving each syllable equal weight:

We are going home. The troop-ship, in a thrill  
Of fiery-chambered anguish, throbs and roars.  
We are going home... victims... three thousand souls.

This poem represents the reworking of the diary entry for May 5th in more emotional and poetic terms. The most striking example of this is the observation in the diary of the soldiers "whose sleeping forms remind me of the dead", (2) which becomes in the poem:

Blanketed soldiers sleeping. In the stark  
Danger of life at war, they lie so still,  
All prostrate and defenceless, head by head...  
And I remember Arras, and that hill  
Where dumb with pain I stumbled among the dead.

This ship delivered its cargo in France and before long  
Sassoon was back in the trenches "only a mile or two away" from where

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he had previously been wounded. After a raid on the enemy's trenches, he he was shot by one of his own men in mistake for a German; consequently he returned to England to spend the remainder of the war in hospital at Lancaster Gate. While convalescing, he wrote a number of poems which draw on the experiences of his months in France and pursue some familiar themes; none of them is a new departure. The situation described in Rear-guard, in which Sassoon attempts to awake a long-dead man, resembles that of The Dug-out. He

saw some-one lie  
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,  
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.

Here the body is that of a dead man who resembles a sleeper: in The Dug-out a sleeping man reminds Sassoon of the dead. A young officer is sleeping at the end of an arduous day. Illuminated by a guttering candle, his face excites in Sassoon the pity and compassion for his immediate comrades that he expressed in such poems as A Subaltern and To Any Dead Officer. The incident on which the poem is based, is recorded in the concluding chapters of Sherston's Progress:

The thought of that candle haunts me now; I don't know why,  
except that it seems to symbolise the weary end of a night  
at war, and that unforgettable remoteness from the ordinary  
existences which we might have been leading. (3)

In the poem, Sassoon ignores the contrast between war and home; he expresses only the emotion aroused by the sight of the vulnerable youth which is too deep to be endured:

It hurts my heart to watch you,  
Deep-shadowed from the candle's guttering gold;  
And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;  
Drowsy, you mumble and sigh and turn your head...

The poet cannot tolerate this semblance of death while it is in his

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power to re-awaken life; his action in waking the sleeper asserts the value of life and of humanity. Unconsciously he associates his own life, perhaps all life with this ungainly figure who is "too young to fall asleep for ever."

~~"Eight vigil-haunted lines"~~, The Dug-out is a good example of the "natural means of expression" that Sassoon had evolved in the shorter poem. Battalion Relief resembles the more colloquial, graphic poems; Sassoon's method is to contrast the beautiful French country-side illuminated by the effects of sunset and summer storm, with the cheerful if apprehensive, soldiers who are blundering through it; in turn, their ironic comments contrast with the clipped, impersonal commands of the officers:

'Fall in! Now get a move on.' (Curse the rain.)  
We splash away along the straggling village,  
Out to the flat rich country, green with June...  
And sunset flares across wet crops and tillage,  
Blazing with splendour-patches. (Harvest soon,  
Up in the line.) 'Perhaps the War'll be done  
By Christmas-Day. Keep smiling then, old son.'

Pity for the men's plight is only permitted in ironic parentheses, the thoughts of the narrator who sees the men as labourers going out to provide rather than reap the harvest.

Among the other war poems in Picture Show, Memorial Tablet expresses Sassoon's disgust with the old, established country civilian order, the pre-war squirearchy with whose representatives he had hunted in less difficult times. The first person of the poem is familiar enough, his is the fate that might have overtaken Albert Meddle, had he kept his temper. The parentheses worked into Sassoon's oratorical decasyllabic lines capture the indignant rush of words from the abused soldier:

Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight,  
(under Lord Derby's scheme). I died in hell -  
(They called it Passchendaele).

At "sermon-time" the Squire spares a glance for the man's name on the list of those killed; his overweening complacency is revealed by his ignorance of the man's real suffering:

Two bleeding years I fought in France for Squire:  
I suffered anguish that he never guessed.  
Once I came home on leave: and then went west...  
What greater glory could a man desire?

Sassoon's immediate poetical postscripts to the war are disappointing. The short, two-stanza piece, Reconciliation, expresses sympathy for the enemy and pity for the mothers observed in The Glory of Women and Enemies but, unlike those poems, it seems to express too correct a sentiment. This may be explained by the fact that the war was over when Sassoon wrote the poem; because the war was over, it seems glib to suggest that reconciliation could derive from its horrors rather than from its cessation:

Men fought like brutes; and hideous things were done;  
And you have nourished hatred, harsh and blind.  
But in that Golgotha perhaps you'll find  
The mothers of the men who killed your son.

Aftermath is a typical war poem, describing war conditions with the addition of rather unsatisfactory choric lines which make the piece sound posed; these are particularly inept at the conclusion:

Have you forgotten yet?...  
Look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you'll  
never forget.

As a reflective poem, this anticipates the superior To One Who Was with Me in the War, published in The Heart's Journey, and by comparison, seems ill-judged and immature. Sassoon had hoped that Aftermath would be

his last war poem "for I assumed that War 'as an instrument of national policy' was completely discredited." (4) Sassoon called Aftermath "an effective recitation-poem"; nonetheless while he was taking elocution lessons in the Albert Hall, in preparation for an American tour, Sassoon failed to arouse the emotions of the char-ladies engaged in cleaning that establishment:

Immediately below the brass rails of the platform four  
char-women, on hands and knees, gazed at me with upturned  
faces and suspended brushes.... I asked the char-women  
whether they had forgotten the war yet... But they had  
ceased to bother about me and my exhortation caused no  
further interruption of their work. (5)

It was Everyone Sang, admirably constructed in two flowing five-line stanzas, that had caught their attention. It is a successful, if rather slight poem in which the advent of peace is received by the people as a bird its freedom. It concludes:

O, but Everyone  
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will  
never be done.

In Siegfried's Journey Sassoon comments that the singing that would "never be done" was the "Social Revolution which I believed to be at hand." (6) Robert Graves did not share his optimism and remarked sourly that "'everybody' did not include me". (7)

The impact of the war and its landscape on Sassoon's conscious-<sup>s</sup>ness had provided him with the raw material of poetry; it had been his inspiration. Towards the end of the war he had hoped to begin a work of "bigger scale" but this was not to be. Occasionally a poem, published in later volumes, looks back to the war but "the dark tremendous song" he planned did not materialise. Neither do the other poems, on subjects other than war give any indication of the direction in which his talents would develop.

As a volume, Picture Show is in some ways reminiscent of

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The Old Huntsman and certainly shows little development from it. The manner is more confident, the tone matured ; yet many of the non-war poems, like most of the war poems have direct counterparts in The Old Huntsman. Before the war Sassoon's lyrical poetry had taken a rather conventional delight, a 'poetic' joy, in the forms and harmonies of nature. In the poem Memory Sassoon recalls his former, carefree existence in language identical with that of his early poems:

When I was young my heart and head were light,  
And I was gay and feckless as a colt  
Out in the fields, with morning in the may,  
Wind on the grass, wings in the orchard bloom.

Sassoon is acutely conscious<sup>s</sup> of the contrast between this early, idyllic life and the one he seems condemned to lead in the future. The poem is consequently nostalgic, heavy with a sense of survival and the paradox of war experience:

But now my heart is heavy-laden. I sit  
Burning my dreams away beside the fire.

Death has made him "wise and bitter and strong" but nonetheless he longs for "peace of home,/ And silence; and the faces of my friends," with its echo of Brooke's "...laughter learnt of friends; and gentleness,/ In hearts at peace..." The poem is a strange amalgam of Sassoon's early style and attitudes: the mystical, yet disillusioned soldier remembers the idealised scenes of his youth which are expressed in generalised language.

The Shelleyan poem, Vision delights in the flux and changing aspect of nature:

I love all things that pass: their briefness is  
Music that fades on transient silences.



This sentiment was similarly expressed in Today, several years before:

Let me stand within  
The circle of your transience, that my voice  
May thrill the lonely silences with song.

Other poems reflect the pre-war pre-occupations of the poet: Nimrod reappears as the captain of Captain at the Point-to-Point; Miracles and Butterflies unite some of the images of Wind in the Beechwood, Storm and Sunlight and Wisdom, to create what are almost hybrid poems. Sassoon was not unaware of these shortcomings; in Limitations he writes:

You've got your limitations; let them sing,  
And all your life will waken with a cry:  
Why should you <sup>halt</sup> ~~hale~~ when raptures on the wing  
And you've no limit but the cloud-flocked sky?...

But some chap shouts, 'Here, stop it; that's been done!'

Sassoon valued the Picture Show poems not so much for their literary value - he never encouraged their publication - as for their therapeutic value. He states in Prelude to an Unwritten Masterpiece that they are:

'Not profound;  
'But such a haunting music in the sound:  
'... it helps us to forget'.

Limitations and Prelude to an Unwritten Masterpiece also indicate the change in Sassoon's attitude towards poetry; they express the malaise of a poetic intellect divorced from its customary inspiration. The whole business of writing poems has become unsatisfactory, degenerating on these extreme occasions into a versifying exercise on the subject of writing poetry. Even this subject is treated ironically: "Why can't you cut it short, you pompous blighter?" But this concluding

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irony in Prelude to an Unwritten Masterpiece does not obscure the poem's main pre-occupation with the poet's disturbed state of mind - acute anxiety manifesting itself in nightmare:

I can't remember how the trouble starts;  
And then I'm running blindly in the sun  
Down the old orchard, and there's something cruel  
Chasing me; someone roused to a grim pursuit  
Of clumsy anger...

The diction and form of the nature poems are reflected to some extent in a number of poems on the notably new theme of love. Sassoon's natural reticence, an aspect of his character he chose to emphasise in his autobiographies, <sup>excludes</sup> ~~precludes~~ the mention of sexual or emotional relationships in those works. In the love poems, Idyll, Parted, Lovers, Slumber-Song and 'The Imperfect Lover' this reserve militates against emotion and realism to produce what amount to little more than formal exercises in the love genre, derivative word-patterns. In Idyll Sassoon again employs the dawn and bird-song which dominate the poem when they seem intended to serve as a background to a tryst between lovers specified only as "You" and "I":

In the grey summer garden I shall find you  
With day-break and the morning hills behind you.  
'There will be rain-wet roses; stir of wings;  
And down the wood a thrush that wakes and sings.

Parted expresses in well-modulated, alliterative lines, suitable trite sentiments about the interval between the lovers' meetings:

I am alive  
Only that I may find you at the end  
Of these slow-striking hours I toil to spend.

Lovers concerns the time after one lover has left the company of the

other and Slumber-Song is about the poem bringing peace to the sleep of the beloved. They read as though they are private works, intended for the loved one alone to read, because she alone can fill in the details, grasp the occasional allusion. These are disappointing poems for the reader because they leave detail unstated and the 'love' quite unsubstantiated. The Imperfect Lover attempts an argumentative tone:

I never asked you to be perfect - did I? -  
 Though often I've called you sweet, in the invasion  
 Of mastering love. I never prayed that you  
 Might stand, unsoiled, angelic and inhuman,  
 Pointing the way toward Sainthood like a sign-post.

Michael Thorpe has written of this poem:

The challenging opening ... has the directness of Donne,  
 and like Donne, too, is ... sceptical and sarcastic. (8)

If this is true, Donne's influence has filtered through the love poems of Rupert Brooke. The opening line recalls the tone and rhythm of the opening line of Brooke's Sonnet (1910) - "I said I splendidly loved you; its not true" (9) - or Brooke's frequent use of the rhetorical question. The sense of love "soiling", and the hints of jealousy that Sassoon's lines convey are also reminiscent of Brooke. However, as Thorpe observes, the initial impetus of the poem fades with the second stanza; the remainder of the poem deals with the possibility of the failure of the relationship in a sombre, yet histrionic manner, and even this involves a Brookean toughness:

Since we loved like beasts, the thing is done,  
 And I'll not hide it, though our heaven be hell.

Other poems in Picture Show, The Goldsmith and Devotion for example, resemble the early poems Villon and Noah in their use of

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history to illustrate the rather simple truth that human life is a more constant factor than the grandeur of history might suggest; Sassoon implies that this must be realised imaginatively. Ancient History, the most successful of these poems, pictures Adam, "a brown old vulture", a "gaunt wild man" mourning the death, not of ~~Abel~~<sup>el</sup> but of Cain, his favourite. A contrast to the effete Abel, "soft and fair", Cain is "a stallion of the plain" and arouses his creator's jealousy by his aggressive response to the earth: "God always hated Cain".

Middle Ages, Wraiths and The Dark House tend towards whimsy and echo Graves and De La Mare. They also draw on the inspiration which motivated the writing of early poems like Goblin Revel and Dryads. The Dark House achieves a sense of mystery associated with secret romantic meetings:

Dusk in the rain-soaked garden,  
And dark the house within.  
A door creaked: someone was early  
To watch the dawn begin.  
But he stole away like a thief  
In the chilly, star-bright air:  
Though the house was shuttered for slumber  
He had left no-one wakeful there.

Here, untypically, Sassoon achieves his effect by understatement. The poem contrasts favourably as a love poem with Parted or Lovers which confuse private emotion with communicative poetry. Middle Ages achieves its effects in the same way; its novelty as a poem written by Sassoon, endeared it to Gosse who wrote in a letter:

The song called Middle Ages (which is technically a new departure for you, is hauntingly admirable - an anthology piece!) does not need more rhymes, for the speed of it is rich enough. (10)

Middle Ages may have been technically a new departure - Sassoon

had always preferred long musical lines - but neither it nor any of the poems in Picture Show show any significant advance in theme, attitude or verse structure; freed from the physical and mental pressure of war, Sassoon began to lapse into the pleasures and ideas that had seemed so vital in pre-war years. The value of the war, in terms of Sassoon's poetical development, was that it had purged his work of archaic diction and disturbed his peace of mind. However he did not immediately renounce his sardonic voice and satirical protest in order to re-establish calmness and spiritual peace in his disordered world, as his next volume of poems was to show.

#### Footnotes to Chapter Four

- 1) Sherston's Progress p.183.
- 2) ibid. p.192.
- 3) ibid. p.249.
- 4) Siegfried's Journey p.141.
- 5) ibid. p.173.
- 6) ibid. p.141.
- 7) Goodbye to All That p.228.
- 8) Siegfried Sassoon: A Critical Study p.44.
- 9) Poetical Works p.105.
- 10) Evan Charteris The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse  
(Heinemann, London, 1931) p.451.

## Chapter Five

### POEMS OF THE TWENTIES

In 1919 Sassoon cultivated his new interest in Socialism and accepted the post of Literary Editor on the staff of the Daily Herald, the newspaper referred to darkly by Sassoon's mother as "that rabid and pestilent rag." In Siegfried's Journey he describes how he spoke at an election on behalf of the 'Arch-pacifist' Snowden, and

wearing corduroy trousers and a bright red tie, I went  
about exploiting my Labour movement personality and my  
reputation as an anti-war poet. (1)

Nonetheless the fox-hunting man was irrepressible and Sassoon frequently rode with the hunt. His "Labour movement personality" was also obliged to co-exist with a social life that included fashionable post-armistice parties, literary dinners and the more rewarding "pilgrimages to poets." His work as Literary Editor enabled him to keep abreast of poetic developments and to develop friendships with Thomas Hardy and leading Georgian poets. A severe attack of sciatica soon limited his activities; when he recovered, he embarked on a successful trip to America. Sassoon did not relinquish his political convictions for a long time; in his account of the General Strike, Osbert Sitwell mentions Sassoon's passionate beliefs:

In such times the warmth of his political sentiments, into  
which he put his heart, made him a valued companion. (2)

It was in the year of the Great Strike, 1926, that Sassoon's next significant book was published. His poems had been printed in a variety

of magazines including The Nation, The New Statesman and Vanity Fair. A new volume of poems did not succeed Picture Show until these were gathered in Recreations, 1923 and Lingual Exercises for Advanced Vocabulary, 1925. These were both privately printed volumes of limited edition, but thirty-seven of the forty-three poems contained in them were united under the title Satirical Poems and published in 1926. Two retrospective volumes had also been printed: Selected poems which was little more than a reprint of War Poems and an edition of The Augustan Books of Modern Poetry which drew thirty-two poems from previous volumes.

Sassoon regarded his satirical poems as a phase which had to be worked out rather than a logical or progressive step from the war poems. His own realisation of their weakness is illustrated by his reluctance to permit them to be printed in ordinary editions, or to have them published at all. In reply to J.C. Squire's request for poems to be included in Second Selections from Modern Poets, Sassoon wrote:

I can only repeat that the Recreations stuff leaves me dissatisfied. However, your letter is so kind that even I cannot be so ungracious as to persist in my refusal to compete. I suppose this keeping my work dark is only an obscure form of conceit. (3)

The reticence expressed in this letter and the ironic self-denigration in the last sentence reveal something of Sassoon's attitude to himself and his work; Sassoon's ultimate failure as a satirist, his failure to develop skills ably demonstrated in the war satires, can be explained largely in terms of his personality. Although the glimpses of Sassoon's personality afforded by the satirical poems are mainly parenthetical, Sassoon is at pains to reconstruct it in the works of autobiography. In the Sherston Trilogy George Sherston is a sensitive, rather diffident young man, a participant in sporting and war-time activities, yet reserved and contemplative. An older Sherston, narrating the experiences of youth, tends to emphasise these traits. Other aspects of Sassoon's character are revealed in the works of straightforward autobiography -

The Weald of Youth and Siegfried's Journey - yet the young poet's actions are marked with a deference to his literary superiors and a difficulty in accepting the coveted fame as a poet. The impact of the war on his psyche has already been described; the impact of peace on his re-ordered sensibilities raises a different problem.

As an "anti-war poet" Sassoon had found targets for his satire largely in civilian figures; their attitude to the war had disgusted the poet whose sympathies lay increasingly with the suffering common soldier. When the soldier reverted to his peace-time role of poorly treated worker, Sassoon adopted the political cause of socialism in place of the vaguer cause of humanity. As he drew his friends from among contemporary ~~literary~~ literary figures and continued to live on private means, the social issues became less well-defined. Sassoon still chose the same targets for his satire - politicians, the press and the church, now widening his scope to include capitalism, the class war and academics. But without the powerful contrast of the trench salient with the plush office or socialite's salon to impose integrity on the poems, they tend either to digress or lose their sharpness in technical and verbal virtuosity. More notably, Sassoon is uncertain of his temperament and his own position in the poems and takes no pains to establish a stand-point from which to direct his operations: he portrays himself as a diffident rather than an indignant reformer, a spectator rather than a participant. In Turner Rooms he becomes an awkward, shuffling versifier whose stature is further reduced in the presence of great art:

Words failed me. Dido's harbour was a gleam  
That vanished in white vapours: and the garden  
Of the Hesperides was but a dream  
Shut in by storm-clad summits. On my toes  
A mild enthusiast trod; and begged my pardon.  
I bit my pencil; blinked; and blew my nose.

In Villa d'Este Gardens, although he feels kinship with dead poets, he is unable to attain their stature and remains gauch, almost philistine



in his approach to his surroundings:

My language favoured Landor, chaste and formal.  
My intellect (though slightly in abeyance)  
Functioned against a Byronistic background.  
Then Browning jogged my elbow; bade me hob-nob  
With some forgotten painter of dim frescoes  
That haunt the villa's intramural twilight.

While roaming in the Villa d'Este Gardens  
I felt like that... and fumbled for my note-book

In Fantasia on a Wittelsbach Atmosphere, the leisured poet of private means is unable to resist the fascination of the "trappings of Autocracy":

My sympathy for Soviets notwithstanding -  
(Dare one deplore the dullness of Democracy?)  
I am touched, I am enticed, by super-lavish  
Expense; half-cultured coxcomb Kings commanding  
In palacefuls the trappings of Autocracy,  
With all their country's coffers ripe to ravish.

The words in reply to these cogitations, indicate the insidious liberalism that was beginning to pervade Sassoon's writings: "Take them for what they were, they weren't so bad!" In these extracts Sassoon presents an ironical self-portrait; the poems are self-regarding in a way alien to the war verses. Nonetheless the poems are verbally accomplished and this seems to be their major virtue.

Although many of the poems are written in the first person, Sassoon occasionally tries to distance his subject-matter by imposing his own personality on a third person. Because his political and social alignments are ambiguous he writes of another man's incongruity at the polite table:

I have seen a man at Lady Lucre's table  
Who stuck to serious subjects; spoke of art

As if he were in earnest and unable  
To ascertain its function in the smart  
World where it shares a recreational part  
With Bridge, best-selling Fiction, and the Stable.

This poem is a success in its disapprobation of "Lady Lucre's set" since its members condemn themselves in speech; what the young man said is tactfully defined in the negative:

'Such dreadful taste!' 'A positive blasphemer!'  
'He actually referred to our redeemer  
As the world's greatest Socialistic teacher!'

Sassoon's own performance at the dinner table, expressed in The Case for the Miners has little to do with presenting a case for the miners or the just distribution of profit. Sassoon writes about his own difficulty in controlling ideas and arguments; he is "unable/ To state the case succinctly." The crude arguments of his fellow diners are too much for him and he falls back onto an appeal to the sympathetic reader:

'Why should a miner earn six pounds a week?  
Leisure! They'd only spend it in a bar!  
Standard of life! You'll never teach them Greek,  
Or make them more contented than they are!  
That's how my port-flushed friends discuss the Strike.  
And that's the reason why I shout and splutter.  
And that's the reason why I'd almost like  
To see them hawking matches in the gutter.

The "almost" in the pen-ultimate line re-affirms the weak liberalism of Fantasia on a Wittelsbach Atmosphere. It is a word conspicuously absent from a war poem like Fight to a Finish where the fusiliers bayonet "Yellow-pressmen" and the poet leads the assault to "clear those Junkers out of Parliament." For "them" to hawk matches in the gutter would be a salutary lesson for all in avoiding such cheap rhetorical questions as

"What do you know about the working classes?"; but Sassoon wastes the opportunity in tolerance, an unsuitable attribute for the satirist.

Sassoon's concept of the class war is unfortunately pervaded by the pessimistic opinion that the privileged classes have a habit of preserving and re-asserting themselves. In the poem On Some Portraits by Sargent, Sargent, "the hireling of the Rich", was able to deny his patronesses the glowing immortality they desired and turn them into "fashion-dated ghostesses"; yet their contemporary counterparts, parading in Hyde Park, prompt the question, in Observations in Hyde Park:

What social magic keeps each carriage-load  
Exempt from Lenin's Communistic Douches?

Similarly, <sup>Even</sup> after the election of a Labour Government, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge are still staffed with reactionaries:

For though the Government has gone vermilion  
And, as a whole, is weak in Greek and Latin,  
The fogies harboured by the august pavilion  
Sit strangely similar to those who sat in  
That edifice when first the Dean went pious, -

Sassoon's attack on the press, one of the mainstays of capitalist society, is more successful because Sassoon had become acutely aware of current journalistic standards during the war. In Lines Written in Anticipation of a London Newspaper Attaining a Guaranteed Circulation of Ten Million Daily his new, restrained, ironic style succeeds in distinguishing itself from the crass jargon of the newspaper in question. Sassoon commiserates with the paper for having missed so many chances of reporting pre-history and the events of the Old Testament:

Stories engrossing to the human heart,  
Sexual, sensational, topical and sordid.  
From Eden outwards, there was nothing lacking

But paper, print, a sound financial backing,  
And an exploitable public...

Sassoon is not content merely to snipe at the paper's low standards of journalism; he extends the scope of his poem to involve the more important issues of press power and influence:

Do I so copiously congratulate  
A lonely Earldom or a Syndicate?  
Or am I speaking to familiar friends  
Who hold your shares and draw fat Dividends?

In the poem Utopian Times, "Lord Bags" an immoral Press Baron, is successfully demolished, yet the poem is curiously ambiguous in its attitude to the future.

Opposed to the Capitalist system and aware of its shortcomings, Sassoon hoped to contribute to its reform through the medium of satire, but his cultural interests tended to draw his attention to social and cultural vices. The frequent confusion of these separate issues leads to obscured intention and muffled effect. In Afterthoughts on the Opening of the British Empire Exhibition Sassoon is at pains to show the pettiness of the men in charge of British state affairs in comparison with their pretensions and actual stature. He watches the dignitaries assemble at Wembley where they are reduced to suitable "pigmy" proportions because of the distance involved; the voice of the King (who cannot be seen) has to be magnified by loud-speakers to a suitably regal volume and the representative of the Established Church has to pervert his Christian message in order that it should be appropriate:

Then a prelate, with prayer  
To the God of Commercial Resources and Arts that are bland,  
Was broadcasted likewise, his crozier of office in hand.  
'For Thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory,'  
he said.

Sassoon then describes the conducting of Blake's Jerusalem by Elgar with the intention that Blake's vision should contradict and expose the sordid pomp of Imperial England. It does not; nor do "the anonymous crowds" understand the message contained in Blake's poem - the organisers of the Exhibition would hardly allow the performance of any work generally considered politically undesirable. That Blake meant something else does not prevent the nameless <sup>names</sup> ~~"gangs"~~ from misinterpreting Jerusalem which suffers accordingly in the context of the poem.

The Philistinism of his age provoked Sassoon to attack it in its various manifestations; the lack of distinction between Jerusalem and the brass band's clamorous heralding of George V in the poem just discussed is merely one aspect, although the misinterpretation of music is a favourite theme. The failure of the audience to engage in Bacchanalian orgy and riot at a performance of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring provokes, at first, wry comment:

This matter is most indelicate indeed

Yet, one perceives no symptom of stampede.

The absence of fitting audience reaction is contrasted with Sassoon's own response. At this stage in the poem the diction becomes outlandish, and, irritatingly overwrought, ruins the effect

But savagery pervades me; I am frantic

With corybantic rupturing of laws.

Come, dance, and sieze this clamorous to function

Creatively, - abandoning compunction

Inranti-social rhapsodic applause!

Lynch the conductor! Jugulate the drums!

Butcher the brass! Ensanguinate the strings!

This is not the language of one giving way to urges that promise the "joys" of "monkeydom". In Homage à Mendelsohn he seems to suggest that although one may consider the composer's music to be decadent, one should "welcome" his "sinking chords," and the poem is merely a defence

of "sentiment."

Sassoon's attack on the audience at A Post-Elizabethan Tragedy seems to recapture some of the old vitriol with a heavy, one-sided slam at phoney culture:

They squeeze and smoke; a jabbering, concious crowd  
Of intellectual fogies, fools and freaks, -  
A cultural inferno, parrot-loud  
With cliches of accumulated weeks

Sassoon dissipated his effect by the inclusion of the play, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore in his attack, finding it composed of nothing more than "examples of archaic indecorum" and quite "out of fashion". If the point of the satire is that the audience cannot distinguish good drama, then the merits or demerits of the play are irrelevant. Similarly Sassoon's objections to a New York production of Richard the Third seem carping and unnecessary:

The casualties were numerous: and at last  
He diidd ( in clashing brass-ware), tired but tense;  
Lord of his own undoing, crazed, aghast,  
And propertied regardless of expense.  
And the whole production paled and passed,  
Self-concious like its brilliant audience.

Antiquarians and academics are the subjects of another group of "satirical poems" of which Early Chronology and Founder's Feast are perhaps the most successful. Founder's Feast re-introduces one of the "screaming, scarlet majors." Having observed and dismissed the "loquacious graduates" and hinted at the general calibre of the proceedings by comparing the age of the Madeira with that of the "toothless Regius professor", Sassoon scans the High Table until he discovers an old foe:

But on the Provost's left in gold and blue,  
Sat... O my God!.. great Major-General Bluff...

Enough enough enough enough enough!

Early Chronology undermines academic pretensions to a clear, exciting view of the past, and an assured explanation of the development of human culture:

Beyond the college garden something glinted;  
A copper moon climbed clear above black trees.  
Some Lydian coin?... Professor Brown agrees  
That copper coins were in that culture minted.  
But as her whitening way aloft she took,  
I thought she had a pre-dynastic look.

The tone of non-committal preference for the moon is suited to the poem; Professor Brown is hardly a figure of vice. Sassoon mentions the composition of this poem in Siegfried's Journey and sheds light on the pattern and method of his "satirical poems."

I had it in mind to attempt realistic poems about everyday life... although my existence since the war had been undirected and adrift, my literary instinct was sufficiently wide-awake to warn me against allowing the vehemence of my war writings to become a mannerism.

Slowly the daylight left our listening faces...  
Professor Brown with level baritone  
Discoursed into the dusk.

Thuswise... I demonstrated my transition to the new style of versifying which I proposed to cultivate. It was the pattern for a series of descriptive pieces in which I assumed a laconic, legato tone of voice, and endeavoured to be mellow, sophisticated and mildly sardonic. Some of them were overwritten and little more than exercises in verbal accuracy and adroitness, but they served me well in my resolve to acquire a controlled method of expression. (4)

The intentions expressed in this passage rather contradict the title Satirical Poems under which the poems were gathered and it indicates their strength and weakness. At times the controlled, ironic voice successfully castigates social affectation, privilege and philistinism, yet the "verbal adroitness" leads to overwriting and a sense of triviality; whimsy and self-indulgent word-play overloads the poems. Sassoon's ability to control sharp, incisive diction is rejected in favour of outlandish and invented words, persistent hyphenation and intrusive alliteration:

Drab drugget paths protect these polished floors  
From tourist-soled attrition. Guide-book phrases  
Co-ordinate fatigued and baffled brains  
With mute ex-regal affluence, Simpering faces  
Exposed in state-saloons and corridors  
Survive the modes of soporific reigns.

Dogma has sent Antiquity to sleep  
With sacrosanct stultiloquential drones.

Writing some years later, John Betjeman succeeded where Sassoon failed.

With the juicy brevity of the war poems deliberately written out of his system, Sassoon wrote intellectually disorganised, hopefully iconoclastic verses, mainly in iambic pentameters. Many are urbane and ironic; yet none merit the title Satirical Poems. The titles of the original, privately printed volumes, Recreations and Lingual Exercises for Advanced Vocabularians, are nearer his intention. Retrospectively, these poems provide little more than a transition between the war satires and the later contemplative poems. Sassoon himself expressed this view in a letter to his publisher concerning the publication of Lingual Exercises:

I have done with verbal gymnastics in future. Being smart don't suit me, really. But it was a phase that had to be worked out, and now I can be as simple, sensuous and passionate as I please. (5)



Sassoon devoted the rest of his poetic career to fulfil this intention.

To conclude Sherston's Progress, Sassoon wrote:

...it is only from the inmost silences of the heart that we know the world for what it is, and ourselves for what the world has made us. (6)

Sherston's Progress was published nearly a decade after Sassoon had consciously undertaken the examination of these "inmost silences of the heart" in The Heart's Journey which was the first book of poems to break away from what may be loosely termed his war inspiration. The Heart's Journey, published in 1927, begins a systematic examination of ~~the inner experiences~~, of what Sassoon termed the "heart" - those elements of the mind which are most fitted to comprehend the "soul" and its relation to the nature of man. The Heart's Journey is a collection of poems which, although they have no common pattern or obvious unity, share a common purpose. This purpose is stated in the first three poems.

The first poem introduces the poet's intention - by means of contemplative self-examination to set down in "song" fragmented elements of the "heart" in order that the "harmonies" that these reveal may be worked into unified poems and move collectively towards a deeper understanding of the most basic harmonies:

Song, be my soul; set forth the fairest part  
Of all that moved harmonious through my heart.

The "soul" may only be approached through the "heart" and the result set down in "song"; yet the simple juxtaposition of "song" and "soul" in the second stanza indicates that this is a two-way process. The purpose of this personal re-appraisal of inner strength is to regenerate the "heart" which has become in some way "fallen" or debased and to re-establish a state of child-like simplicity - "childhood's garden" - where the regenerative process is recognisable in the basic patterns of night and day (most distinctly observed at dawn), wild-life and the

seasons:

Soul, be my song; returned arrayed in white;  
Lead home the loves that I have wronged and slain:  
Bring back the summer dawns that banished night  
With distant-warbling bird-notes after rain...

This poem also establishes symbols of regeneration that provide unities peripheral to the basic themes of the poems and that help to weave them into a complex. Obvious examples are the birds and bird-song. The birds are not merely symbols of positive harmony but reminders of it in their own right; in the second poem they sing on despite the ravages of winter; eventually, because of their persistence, they herald Spring:

Sing bravely in my heart, you patient birds  
Who all this weary winter wait for spring;  
Sing, till such wonder wakens in my words  
As I have known long since, beyond all voicing, -

The birds inspire something greater than "voicing" or the writing of poetry, and lead to the separate, personal function of guarding the spirit, the "inward solemn influence" which is "Invisible, intangible, unkennded." This influence is "life within.. life" and will ultimately unite the poet "with that stillness whence my spirit came". The third poem consolidates these ideas and images by picturing the poet in the early morning, pacing a cold garden in spring, a garden containing the unrealised elements of paradise - "boding of Elysian days to be":

Cold was the music of the birds; and cold  
The sunlight, shadowless with misty gold:  
It seemed I stood with Youth on the calm verge  
Of some annunciation that should bring  
With flocks of silver angels, ultimate Spring  
Whence all that life had longed for might emerge.

In these three poems Sassoon establishes his purpose which is

to rediscover his personal "paradise" rarely experienced since his youth. This "paradise" can be rediscovered by uniting the "inward solemn influence" which is the impulse toward spiritual regeneration with the "song that has no end" which is eternal truth; this healing process would awaken "wonder" in Sassoon's poems - "words" or "songs". Poetry should body forth otherwise inexpressible spiritual truths; for Sassoon it is the only agency of the ineffable. For this purpose straightforward intellectual self-analysis would be an inadequate method; the "heart" is a delicate concept that must be expressed in symbols (which need not be constant) and thus made visual within the framework of lyrical poetry. In his lecture On Poetry Sassoon says:

Thinking in pictures is my natural means of self-expression.

I have always been a submissively visual writer. (7)

Sassoon's ideas are visualised largely in terms of idyllic landscape pictured at sun-rise and made melodic by birds. Various associated images recur throughout Sassoon's work - the colour white invariably represents purity and the dawn a sense of renewal. Sassoon's idealised landscapes are also the "visualisation" of "paradise" which is the "heart's" proper resting-place at the conclusion of its journey. The journey itself represents the contemplative re-ordering of the "heart" which, as a concept, is loosely opposed to reason or dispassionate intellect, although Sassoon avoids the negative definition of his purpose and ideas.

In terms of the volume as a whole, the first three poems establish and define, albeit "visually", Sassoon's intention in writing poetry. After these general statements, Sassoon widens the scope of his contemplation to include poems on the major themes of love, solitude and mortality. Of these, the three love poems are slight, conventional pieces concerning "Elysian-hearted" lovers and dwelling, in company with the love poems of Picture Show, on the poignancy of separation. Poem VI is interesting in its echoes of early Yeats whom Sassoon never mentions in his writings:

And you are clad in the garment of my dreams:

Led by my heart's enchanted cry, your feet

Move with the murmur of forest-wandering streams...

Sassoon uses "the faculty of inward visualisation" to create many images of his search for spiritual self-knowledge. The image of the room tends to represent the "self" or "heart" in isolation. In Farewell to a Room Sassoon, standing outside the room he is leaving, feels capable of comprehending ineffable, imperceptible truths, and that he is

Shutting the door on what has housed so much,  
Nor hand, nor eye, nor intellect could touch, -

Similarly in A Midnight Interior, the reader is taken inside a room at the calmest hour of the night. In this setting Sassoon finds himself more sensually aware:

To-night while I was pondering in my chair  
I saw for the first time a circle of brightness  
Made by my patient lamp on the ceiling.  
It shone like a strange flower; then my stare  
Discovered an arctic snowstorm in that whiteness;  
And then some pastoral vale of rayed revealing.

These fanciful images draw his attention to the simple white flowers in a bowl at his elbow, which, by showing him "the way to wonder" impel him to restate his ideas and renew his search. This takes the form of a plea to "trust" and "intelligence" to release his soul through "every door of sense":

O grant me strength to find  
From lamp and flower simplicity of mind.

The <sup>search</sup>~~search~~ for "simplicity of mind" is one conducted in calmness and meditation. Nonetheless it is accompanied by certain personal dangers which Sassoon recognises and is prepared to face. The loneliness implicit in Farewell to a Room and A Midnight Interior is consciousness of "self" pressed to extremes. In poem<sup>em</sup> XVI Sassoon observes that

without the beneficent agency of nature, the contemplative spirit must rely on "memory-sight" to recall earlier "ecstasies" which can provide solace and compensate for "How strange we grow when we're alone." These moments of remembered pleasure would become mere nostalgia were they not checked by the

will for power

To ask of life no more than life can earn.

Loneliness is the greatest test of simple self-awareness and of personality:

Alone... The word is life endured and known.

It is the stillness where our spirits walk

And all but inmost faith is overthrown.

Consciousness of death is another test; yet Sassoon does not imply that it is in any way opposed to life. Death is therefore absorbed into the thematic framework of the volume. Sassoon's concept of death closely resembles that of Henry Vaughan, a major influence on Sassoon at this time. Vaughan's influence is particularly noticeable in a poem like Strangeness of Heart. In The Retreat Vaughan refers to an existence previous to life on earth which is the "second race." Consequently the child is more capable of apprehending the "shadows of eternity" in the forms of nature, clouded by his memory of God. Vaughan speaks of a spiritual journey, undertaken to retrace his steps to the former state of grace:

O how I long to travel back

And tread again that ancient track!

...

And when this dust falls to the urn

In that state I came return.

He sees the "forward motion" of life taking him away from true knowledge of the divine so that when he dies, he will be furthest away from his early experiences. Sassoon shares this attitude to death, seeing it as the culmination of the process of discarding the powers, visions and

insights which began to fade in early childhood. The "pang... first felt in childhood", the "strangeness of heart" declines through "many sunsets". The "pang" and the "strangeness" are the awareness of those truths which can now only be expressed in poetry and are therefore in childhood an "untranslated song". Consistent with other poems expressing Sassoon's personal philosophy, this journey through life is imaged in dawn and evening; the associated passion is provoked by bird-song:

When I have lost those simple spells that stirred  
My being with an untranslated song,  
Let me go home forever; I shall have heard  
Death; I shall know that I have lived too long.

The weakness of this poem as a rapprochement with death is marked by contrast with XXV - "One who watches..." - a poem less consciously concerned with "visualising" the themes, but perhaps because of this, more faithful to Sassoon's slogan: "simplicity and directness." (§) In this poem Sassoon is forewarned of the imminence of death in his friends whom death has the power to reduce to "memories, recordings and convenings/ Of voices". Nonetheless the memory of valued friends is beneficial; dead friends achieve a certain immortality by becoming "hoarded" in the "heart".

It is a small step from this consideration to a discussion of the immortality that writers achieve. Grandeur of Ghosts suggests that they are more alive than those who quote their works for shallow social purposes. The great dead bequeath life to "Such-a-one" and his friend "Someone-else". In To An Eighteenth Century Poet dead poets whose ~~heart~~ "hearts" are their "highways" are our living spiritual mentors - "Who then shall dare to say that they have died?"

In At the Grave of Henry Vaughan Sassoon asserts that the poet's name "flows on for ever..." However the immortality awarded by the inscriptions on the New Menin Gate, the names of the "unheroic dead who fed the guns", fills him with old bitterness and disgust. In On Passing The New Menin Gate, Sassoon considers the "foulness" of the deaths which

are rewarded with a "pile of peace-complacent stone". The poem is an accomplished sonnet and is constructed round two separate questions: "Who will remember" and "Was ever an immolation so belied...?" The final couplet is an ironic assertion tossed away as the poet turns from the edifice in disgust:

Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime  
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

Although the sight of this monument arouses in Sassoon an old concern, To One in Prison fails to achieve a sense of compassion. The convict is a young "Albert Meddle" whose home background is less than desirable; he strikes a very false note however with his patriotic posturings and his love for his mother. Finally Sassoon loses interest in the prisoner and concludes the poem on an ambiguous note of self-revelation:

And now - what use the pity that I am heaping  
Upon your head? What use - to wish you well  
And slam the door? Who knows?.. My heart not yours can tell.

XXVIII unites in a single poem aspects of Sassoon's major theme, the nature of Life and Death, and with "simplicity and directness" provides an appropriate "visualisation" of what Sassoon considers the essential components of Being. Sassoon stands "Close-wrapped in living thought" with "Death and daybreak on either hand", observing the torment of souls. The experience leads to a gigantic reaffirmation of Faith; doubts are the "obscene derision/ Of demon-haunters." Faith permits us to "Exult, unknowing what we are" because this Faith has trust in an "ultimate power" which is the "victory" and the "vision". It is in the concluding poems of this volume that Sassoon is able to discuss his idea of God in philosophical terms rather than as a "visualised" Pantheistic being who is uniquely symbolised, <sup>by</sup> rather than contained in the forms of nature. The "incongruous elements" of human nature, mentioned in XXVI, which had for so long perplexed Sassoon, begin to be seen as the ration-

al elements of a being capable of choice. Sassoon expands this idea in VI a poem which leans rather heavily on Blake in stating this paradox:

In me, past, present, future meet

...

In me the tiger sniffs the rose.

It is in the heart that these contradictory "elements assemble": "lusts" set upon "Reason" and the "cave-man clasps the seer"; but it would be uncharitable to regard this poem merely as a plea for passionate thinking. Sassoon is stating the futility of dividing the human make-up into elements if in doing this one loses sight of the existential whole. For Sassoon this is a theological argument. The heart perceives that these are the rational components of a being capable of choice and Sassoon infers that God gave man life that he might choose.

As God gave life, so it may be returned to Him by means of faith and religious feeling in a process so mutual that one becomes indistinguishable from the other. For Sassoon this is sufficient explanation of the purpose of life and he expounds it in the antithetical poem The Power and the Glory which concludes with the assertion <sup>Let</sup> ~~Let~~ "Life be God". These convictions are untransposable and may only be hinted at in simple poetry, but they lead the heart to tranquility at the end of its journey. Although unformulated, the idea of God subsists in Sassoon's poetry and represents the longed-for awakening of deeper spiritual values and feelings, whose "visualisation" is simple and direct. <sup>xxxx</sup> ~~He~~ uses the image of a pure white flower to express the "peace" achieved by Sassoon's meditations; the flower has been "sown" by "powers unknown" and is therefore only partially perceived:

I know you only as my need

And my unsealed sight.

Sassoon wished to withdraw into "the inmost silences of the heart" and to provide himself with a sanctuary into which to retreat



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from the conflicts that had been aroused in his mind by his war experience and awareness of the social disorder and confusion, injustice and hypocrisy indicated by his satirical poems. This withdrawal into a contemplative, religious mood meant that Sassoon was to reject his most profitable poetic voice. His new meditative approach was also restrictive in terms of subject-matter and audience; to shrug off the physical world, as far as it existed in its own right and not as a convenient "visualisation" of thought, was to ignore contemporary sensibility. The poems of The Heart's Journey and the poems that develop from them in subsequent volumes, make no attempt to recreate experience; they eschew the known life in ~~order~~<sup>order</sup> to explore territory charted as "the region of the heart" and its relationship with the soul; areas which may be apprehended intuitively and bodied forth in traditional poetic forms to which the elementary devices of metre and versification lend significance and emotive power.

#### Footnotes to Chapter Five

- 1) Siegfried's Journey p.135.
- 2) Laughter in the Next Room 4th vol. Left Hand, Right Hand (Macmillan, London, 1958) p.222.
- 3) Letter to J.C.Squire, 15th June 1923.
- 4) Siegfried's Journey p.167.
- 5) Letter to A.T.Bartholomew, 16th December 1924.
- 6) Sherston's Progress p.280.
- 7) On Poetry (University of Bristol, Bristol, 1939)
- 8) *ibid.*

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Chapter Six.

POEMS OF THE THIRTIES

Writing of Sassoon ~~in~~ as he knew him in the late twenties and early thirties, Peter Quennel gives a familiar portrait of the man; the rather incongruous elements of Sassoon's character seem to be more pronounced and his own awareness of them more acute. Quennel suggests that Sassoon's "crisis" (his war experience) had in some way "benumbed his faculties" (10)

He had become the poetic solitary, the poetic malcontent... of the twentieth century; apt in conversation to make rather too much of his separate and unfriended plight. Melancholy, handsome, reserved - his hollow cheeks suggested an imaginary portrait of a Hebrew Minor Prophet - he was inclined to compare the ascetic life he led with the worldly junketings enjoyed by other writers, and to describe his lonely dead-quiet evening hours during which he listened to a recorded symphony concert and ate his modest dinner off a small tray. (1)

Quennel's observations suggest that Sassoon's character had altered and that this change had been brought about by the war; it was the war that had forced Sassoon into an active role in society alien to his pre-war character ~~and~~ from which he relaxed as he overcame the traumas of his war experience.

In the thirties Sassoon published three new books of poetry: The Road to Ruin, Vigils and Rhymed Ruminations. When it was published in 1933, The Road to Ruin contained only seven poems which represent Sassoon's final serious satiric work. Possibly motivated by Wilfrid

Owen's assertion that it is the poet's duty to "warn", Sassoon embarked on a short series of what one reviewer called "faint sarcasms in verse". (2)

In At the Cenotaph, the devil is offering a prayer at that monument for the dead of the First World War; his intention is that men should forget the significance of the Cenotaph and revive "their discredited ideas" particularly that war is an expression of "the pride and power of being alive". The devil pleads with the "Lord of Hosts" to "increase"

Men's biologic urge to readjust

The map of Europe

as if this were an unchangeable trait of human nature. The devil sees man's folly to be an essential part of man's nature, so his prayer is ironic; what has happened in the past will happen again and is suitably commemorated by the Cenotaph. The empty tomb is an empty warning, the hollow symbol of man's failure to profit by his own history. The devil therefore envisages the pattern of the First World War repeating itself: "large destructive lust" finally concluded with "blind vindictive Peace" presumably along the lines of the Peace of Versailles.

The terms of reference in At the Cenotaph are limited; the "biologic urge" seems an inadequate explanation of the contemporary political situation and illustrates the difference between Sassoon and the new poets who had achieved recognition during the early years of the thirties. Sassoon's devil is a mild-mannered "unostentatious and respectful" fellow who <sup>thinks of</sup> ~~conceives~~ human nature in the simplest terms. W.H. Auden found the devil a convenient persona in Song for the New Year. In this poem the devil emerges triumphant by using the specific inventions of mankind:

For the devil has broken parole and arisen

He has dynamited his way out of prison

...

Like influenza he walks abroad...

The image of insidious disease in which the devil may permeate society is more effective than the image of the man in the street. The tone of the poem tends to shout down Sassoon's genteel voice and Auden's devil is capable of guile and disguise.

In Mimic Warfare Sassoon observes how tanks on manoeuvres prove that nations are "pledged to war's traditional crimes". Sassoon intends to expose the fallacy that the only viable form of peace is armed preparedness. Occasionally he achieves lines reminiscent of successful war poems; in one instance, the shrill chorus line in the music hall in Blighters:

Genial tanks go grinding  
Along the tarmac. Joining in the fun  
An armoured lorry hauls an aircraft gun.

Sassoon only occasionally uses the caesura in his later poems; in the war poems he used it to break the iambic pentameter in order to emphasise a phrase or vary the rhythm. An Unveiling returns to this practice and recalls the flavour of the war poems in other ways. 'The President mouths platitudes similar to those of the Bishop in They; he speaks of "our million Dead" who are only too literally "now forever London."

'Our bequest  
Is to rebuild, for What-they-died-for's sake,  
A bombproof roofed metropolis, and to make  
Gas-drill compulsory. Dulce et Decorum est...'

Written in the style of the war satires and with a deliberate echo of Owen, this poem seems to demonstrate the futility of "warning."

The Ultimate Atrocity pursues this point. The "first man who wasn't quite an ape" prayed for the "world's redemption" and was joined by an increasing number of his fellows: "From then till now their task has been the same..." Their aspirations are now faced with the "first bacterial bomb". Sassoon expresses righteous indignation at this state of affairs, but the poem fails because Sassoon cannot believe that the

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the final catastrophe will occur; the conditional "if" and "might" weaken the satire.

A Premonition is a more successful warning because it avoids the modest tone of cautious optimism in favour of a crashing assertion of total pessimism. In the person of a gas-proof ghost, Sassoon visits the National Gallery to examine the fate of its contents; outside, the victims of chemical warfare "Lie hunched and twisted" in the "Disaster of Trafalgar Square." Sassoon discovers that under the rules of the new warfare, "The claim/ Of art was disallowed." Impersonal, insidious gas, the symbol of man's inhumanity and the negation of his values, cannot <sup>comprehend</sup> ~~distinguish~~ these symbols of enduring beauty and ~~is~~ slowly destroying the finest achievement of mankind:

Past locks

And walls crass war had groped, and gas  
Was tarnishing each gilded frame.

Shortening his customary iambic lines, Sassoon economises on alliteration in order to allow the rhymes to emphasise the last line of each of the two stanzas.

These poems express Sassoon's own attitudes: his hatred of war and his feeling of impotence in the face of national forces that seem inevitable in their destructive impulses. One reviewer remarked that "his arguments do not rest on proportional thinking" ~~xx~~ (2) and it is indeed remarkable that a former ~~Marxist~~ can see the forces at work in society only in terms of "Men's biologic urge". This weakness is explained, though only to a limited extent, by Sassoon's expressed preference for Swinburne's Songs Before Sunrise and his <sup>dislike</sup> ~~deprecation~~ of the "tub-thumping" thirties poets like Auden and Day Lewis, and by his withdrawal into a private monastic world.

Although his other two volumes of poems published in the thirties ~~express~~ this withdrawal, Sassoon's memories of the past and his fears concerning the future are not entirely absent. The horror of war, though remaining known in the sense that Sassoon fervently wished to see no repetition of the carnage, was fading from his mind. In the poem War Experience, "groping thought" finds difficulty in recalling

the Battle of the Somme; the mind, divorced from physical reality, softens and obscures that reality:

Not much remains, twelve winters later, of the hater  
Of purgatorial pains. And somewhat softly booms  
A Somme bombardment: almost unbelievably looms  
The day-break sentry staring over Kiel Trench crater.

These memories fade, but in poem 17 the voices of dead soldiers are "persistent haunting presences." In Ex-Service the dead deride current "armamental madness" and their "swindled ghosts" reaffirm Sassoon's conviction of the futility of war:

Dream voices these - denying  
Dud laurels to the last.

After the outbreak of the Second World War Sassoon <sup>could</sup> ~~can~~ only express conventionally martial sentiments. In The English Spirit the ghostly presences of dead comrades are in full support of the war:

The ghosts of those who have wrought our English past  
Stand near us now in unimpassioned ranks  
Till we have braved and broken and overcast  
The cultural crusade of Teuton tanks.

Silent Service rehearses Brooke's attitudes; there is a sense of absolution and abstract virtue is raised above human suffering. Taking his cue from Kipling and Watson, Sassoon promotes nationalism and creates a sense of occasion resembling the poems printed in newspapers at the beginning of the war in which he <sup>had</sup> fought. These two poems appeared in the pages of The Observer in the summer of 1940.

The English Spirit and Silent Service indicate how far Sassoon had succeeded in repressing old pre-occupations; he had spent many years in cultivating solitude and a contemplative life, making these the

atmosphere and setting of his poems. The Heart's Journey had established his task; the bulk of his poetry until his death in 1967 was concerned with a spiritual search for truths that he could accept as being solely and universally the property of the religious man, truths set aside from progress, machinery, politics, society and war: truths that endure in the human "heart."

Vigils and Rhymed Ruminations continue this search, although they still contain poems which express doubts concerning its proper direction. Vigils was published as an ordinary English edition in 1935 although twenty-two of the poems contained in it had been privately published the previous year in expensive editions. Rhymed Ruminations followed a similar procedure and the first English ordinary edition appeared in 1940.

The mood of Vigils is relaxed and reflective; but a sense of sadness and world-weariness pervades Sassoon's quest for self-knowledge. In a review of Tennyson in The Daily Herald, Sassoon wrote that the first thing a writer learns to be is himself. An Emblem, the opening poem of Vigils, attempts to elucidate this point in a short, tense poem. The stress on the first and last syllable of each brief line gives an added sense of solidity and growth:

Poet, plant your tree  
On the upward way;  
Aromatic bay  
Plant, that men may see  
Beauty greenly growing  
There in storm or shine,  
And through boughs divine  
Freedom bravely blowing.

The tree is emblematic of slowly accomplished self-realisation and of its expression in poetry. As the tree must achieve maturity before "Freedom" can blow through its branches, the poet must achieve full spiritual growth in order to be properly free. In the title poem, the

Lone heart learning  
By one light burning,  
Slow discerning of worldhood's worth.

The emphasis is again on the individual's need to come to self-knowledge by his own quiet path which leads to "Peace" imaged in the "remote morning star." The elegant, Elected Silence is a plea for separateness, essential for the undertaking of this task:

Allow me now much musing-space  
To shape my secrecies alone:  
Allow me life apart, whose heart  
Translates instinctive tragi-tone.

Stillness harmonises with nature and enables man to identify himself with what is enduring in the world: "earth and heaven not made with hands." In Vigil in Spring, nature not only reflects man's maturity but unifies him with his youth, bringing the instinctive "aliveness" to him that he experienced then. Even though he may "lean from life", he is capable of feeling "growth's annunciate thrust and thrill." This "inbreathed awareness" is again captured in December Stillness; from it Sassoon wishes to derive strength to continue his spiritual journey:

December stillness, crossed by twilight roads,  
Teach me to travel far and bear my loads.

Although man is capable of intuitive perceptions, maturity tends to distance him from the therapeutic, guiding beauties of nature so that he may measure and judge his life. Consistent with this, several poems in Vigils explore the theme of childhood love of nature and its relevance in maturity. Poem 6 describes how "love of life" motivates the child, but "loneliness" teaches him wisdom; poem 7 shows how this wisdom leads the poet back to a more sensitive appraisal of the value of the



dreams of youth and childhood. Such memories also provide comfort for the "rediscovering soul." The world of childhood contains an innocence that must be re-examined in maturity; its value is ambivalent however. Without the knowledge brought by maturity, childhood innocence lacks substance. Although experiencing pain at its loss, Sassoon realises that the child's easy relationship with nature is not the purpose of living.

A number of poems in Vigils are concerned with death; even a consideration of his youth, in poem 6, involves Sassoon in thoughts of death and to him the actual dead are more real than the living. The death of friends is a constant factor in Sassoon's life; he is haunted by presences from the past. In many cases these presences are benificent only the ghosts of soldiers are difficult to control. In Vibrations the gently modulated lines evoke the voices of past acquaintances:

I hear you, vanished voices, where such peace  
Imbues my being as when your gladness breathed.

One voice is that of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers whose influence is one of acknowledged good:

I feel  
His influence undiminished,  
And his life's work, in me and many, unfinished.

Ghosts evade serious contact, yet they are persistent. In Poem 22, the dead demand "to be remembered strongly" but Sassoon is powerless to assist their arrival; he can only pose the question: "Can what we are empower your quiet returning?" Sassoon is imprecise concerning the nature of these visitations whose presence is only half-realised and imperfectly understood. The poems themselves are rather weak. They are given strength by Sassoon's meticulous rhyming, the dignified metre and length of line, but the subject-matter is too personal to be anything more than <sup>the</sup> assertion that Sassoon remembers certain friends who remain unspecified. Set in the context of his meditative poems, the implication is that these mysterious beings inhabit the quieter recesses of the

mind and are the joint product of memory and psyche; filling an emotional need they become explicable, available and preserved.

Although as a general rule, Sassoon prefers to arrive at his "explanations of life" by introspective processes, drawing conclusions from his own solitary thinking and moving from there, if necessary to universal conclusions, there is a group of poems in Vigils in which he attempts to examine the collective development of mankind. Occasioned by a sense of history, these poems suppress Sassoon's sense of the individual. In the poem Memorandum, individual identity is submerged in the mass of humanity. No longer a collection of autonomous individuals, "In multitudes we grope"; historical events are "blurred" in which "blind hordes have laboured and destroyed", and "racial memories haunt the souls of nations". Sassoon can only counter these dubious, misanthropic comments by supposing that if there truly is "some Power" who is "supreme/ In differentiating wrong from right" then that power might observe "all human consciousness" as a sleeper unable to awake from a "purgatorial dream." In the poem Human Histories "the multitudinous dead" fail to provide any insights into human problems; like "books unread" they are permanently shelved in "the library of Time." Similarly, in Babylon the city built "towers in time" only to be faced with oblivion therefore, by analogy, for us "Auguries of self-annihilation loom." Humanity is constantly faced with Time, the levelling factor; only the vaguest and most generalised knowledge of history remains. These <sup>poems</sup> ~~poems~~ are not consistent with Sassoon's more personal poetry where human consciousness resides only in individuals. The Hour-Glass expresses a more personal attitude to the problem of time. Picturing himself holding the hour-glass in his hand, Sassoon derives "intimate omens" from it; it is a memento mori, containing "The world's enigmas in its quietly falling grains." These poems are written in regular metres rhyming alternately, or in couplets; only occasionally does Sassoon attempt a special effect as in Babylon where he varies the syllable and line length to emphasise the destruction of Belshazzar, who "Ruled; and to ruin fell." The rhythm of these poems is lent power by Sassoon's constant use of multi-syllabled words: "Obliquities", "self-annihilation", "multitudinous". These words have the effect of shortening the ideas

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contained in a line while consuming a large portion of the metre. In this way Sassoon's ideas become portentous and weighty.

The remainder of the poems in Vigils reassert Sassoon's belief in the inner life. In a few short poems he attempts to examine the relationship between man, with his paradoxical construction, part mystic part brute, and his ideas of God and Heaven. Poem 30 asserts the existence of the inner mind which is a sanctuary from the external world and is identical with the heart. This inner world is perceived almost intuitively, yet from it man derives the strength to pursue knowledge of it. Consequently Sassoon addresses a plea to it:

World undiscovered within us, radiant-white,  
Through miracles of sight unmastered still,  
Grant us the power to follow and fulfil.

This undiscovered world is equated in other poems with the "spirit" whose aspiration is towards heaven. In the poem Heaven Sassoon gives, in three short stanzas, three differing attitudes to, or ideas of, heaven. He realises that in its perjorative sense, "heaven" is "designed by man's death-fearing mind" and <sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> the ill-founded hope of the dying. Rejecting this, he tries to define his own concept of heaven in negative terms; heaven becomes the reward of "racked renunciation":

The spirit in its ultimate aspiration  
Shares the world-sacrifice and dies divine.

Credo also rejects the debased concept of heaven and involves the concept of a God who will never be witnessed; "heaven" and "God" are to be contained in the final "evolvment" of better human beings from the present, imperfect, "brutish" species. To die is to achieve "heaven"; whether there is any existence after death is the concern of the dead alone. In Everyman, an irregularly composed poem, the living man is naturally impelled towards death and longs for it; the "doomed protagonist" experiences "the sickness of the soul for sleep". He may rebel and fight his condition with "pride" but, finally capitulating, this

"impassioned pigmy" is

Set free to be again

Companion in repose with those who were once men.

Immortality is not the hope of men, although in Credo Sassoon points out that future generations will perpetuate "hope divine"; the act of dying is all that mankind can know.

Ode, the concluding poem of Vigils, is the most succinct statement of Sassoon's spiritual position. The poem is concerned with man's temptation to construct God in his own image, the sin of spiritual pride. He therefore constructs a vision of the "city of God", but this vision is limited by the limits of man's understanding; he can only express his concepts in terrestrial terms:

Power, envisioned by earth's discerning,  
Peace, by mortal aspiring wrought.

Man is "sense-confined"; he cannot hope to guess that his dreams bear any resemblance to the reality. The vision of the first stanza of Ode is not invalidated by the limits of man's understanding; the temptation is to suppose it a clear vision. Time stands between man and God: "Not from time shall he look on heaven." Only by the defeat of time through death can man achieve full knowledge of God.

These theological speculations are not continued in Rhymed Ruminations. The poems in this volume, published five years after Vigils suggest a considerable advance towards the achievement of the ardently desired peace of mind, although the mood of the volume is still withdrawn and melancholic. Occasionally Sassoon reappears in his role as man of action even if the action is only riding a horse through the Wiltshire woods. After his marriage in 1933, Sassoon went to live at Heytesbury House in Wiltshire where he resided until his death. He had desired to opt out of society, to create a barrier between himself and the world as he had formerly known it, but he did not wish to achieve this only in a

personal sense. Although his search for self-revelation necessarily involved a degree of introspection, Sassoon also wished to isolate himself physically in the country.

Consequently Sassoon's world is circumscribed; Heytesbury House is the centre of his universe from which he makes forays into private places in the Wiltshire countryside, like "Blunden's Beech", where he may think. If anything disturbs this world it either comes from within his own mind or is the consequence of some chance encounter. Objects within his boundaries naturally increased in significance for Sassoon. In Outlived by Trees, two short, four-line stanzas describe epigrammatically how the trees in the garden, lime, cedar and beech, give the poet a sense of the continuity of present and future that the disruptive influences of civilisation deny him, although, paradoxically, the trees teach him the "transience" of his life.

The oak is used as a slightly different symbol of continuity in the second stanza of Property. Human beings plunder the countryside without even bothering to consider the significance or even the origin of the tree. In the first stanza Sassoon expresses unease at the idea that his small possessions may be revealed to others and that he may thereby be himself diminished. The raucous rooks frighten him when their presence penetrates the quietness of his study:

Loud was that legion wheeling;  
And queer my inward feeling -  
"These windows are ~~my goods~~ revealing  
~~My chattels~~  
~~redeeming~~ and my goods!"

From this experience Sassoon considers "property" in a wider context, that of man's claim on natural objects. He grows expansive:

Possession thus we claim  
Of natural sights and sounds,  
Who purchase earth with pounds  
And take it all for granted.

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This broad statement fails to invalidate his fear. In other poems the room is used as a symbol of what is most enclosed, most private. In The Heart's Journey, Sassoon used the room as a symbol of his security in such poems as Farewell to a Room and A Midnight Interior. In Vigils, Dr. Rivers returns to visit Sassoon's "heart's room" in his rôle as father-figure and confessor. In Old Music, the poet's mind becomes a "shuttered room" where "thoughts talk" and, like "luminous portraits", "Dead friends pervade the gloom."

The poem Old Music is a disastrous agglomeration of several of Sassoon's central symbols. A Picture of the Muses is constructed on a similar pattern of short, rhyming lines broken into two stanzas according to the change of idea from the first to the second part; in A Picture of the Muses the break occurs at the end of the eighth line and in Old Music it is at the sixth. Property and Old World to New are constructed similarly with one more and one less syllable to each line respectively. By varying the rhyme schemes of these poems according to the number of lines in each section, Sassoon creates emphasises yet the limits to Sassoon's technique are further demonstrated by the fact that in the majority of these poems he uses the symbol of the room. In A Picture of the Muses the room is a pleasant retreat into memories of the past. While Reading a Ghost Story is ~~not~~ constructed on a similar pattern and throws a mild, self-induced doubt on the serenity of Sassoon's room from which he breathes the midnight air:

Old houses have their secrets. Passions haunt them.

. . .

Inside our habitations darkness dwells,

Eulogy of my House written in conventional iambic pentameters, alternately rhymed, which are suited to the dignity of the old building, represents Sassoon's consistent attitude to his home and property. His house contains his final withdrawal from active life into solitude; further than this he cannot retreat. The house reflects his personality and attitudes; although it has experienced "human wrongness", in its

"essential atmosphere" there is no trace "of men's malignity and guilt." The house seems wise; it contains "tranquility and strongness" both of which were attributes coveted by Sassoon and cultivated in his poetry and way of life.

Surrounded by familiar places, Sassoon feels able to appreciate the beauties of nature; but the sense of security is the more vital as his attitude to the rocks in Property has shown. November Dusk shows that the physical presence of nature cannot come closer to "the heart" than that organ will allow; it must be kept beyond the house which contains the permanency of the "fire-lit room."

...I've no need to travel far to find  
The bird who from the leafless walnut tree  
Sings like the world's farewell to sight and song.

Such moments of "tranquility intense" are rare and Sassoon admits that such experiences are governed by something other than the forms of nature. The opening poem of Rhymed Ruminations, Brevities, an eight-line poem divided into four (now rarely employed) rhyming couplets gives four aspects of the poet's character, each of which is given some weight in the book. Sassoon represents himself as the inspired writer of "ruminant" books, the man who "loves to ride alone" in the quiet countryside. He is the man content to die at the appointed hour, having come to terms with the significance of life and death; but he is also

that man who with a furrowing frown  
Thinks harshly of the world and corks it down.

This is an ironic portrait of the man who, having retreated from society, cannot opt out of an awareness of and an anxiety about the state of the world. Although, in his Wiltshire haven, he is able to "ride alone" and sit up at night to write, he cannot avoid the obtrusive concerns of the present.

In Thoughts in 1932 he presents himself as a peaceful rider along a "pre-Roman pack-road". Near Stonehenge a "drone of engines"

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draws his attention to manoeuvring war-planes. Prophetically, Sassoon visualises the possible threat of the aeroplane, a recurrent symbol in these poems of the potential tyranny of invention:

In years to come  
Poor panic-stricken hordes will hear that hum,  
And fear will be synonymous with flight.

The Blitz and the bombing of Dresden bore out his prophecy. In 878-1935 Sassoon contrasts the civilisation of King Alfred with his own. Where once the army of Alfred passed on the march to Eathundun, "janks come lumbering". But this is not an idealised contrast between picturesque Saxon England and brutalised modern times; the brutality of Alfred's time when it was "quite correct to hack and hew the Dane," adds to Sassoon's unease when considering or trying to ignore his own political climate:

Now in a world of books I try to live content,  
And hear <sup>uneasily</sup> ~~uneasily~~ the droning aeroplane.

Although in some ways civilisation seems to have advanced since the battle of Eathundun, a comparison between the 870s and the 1930s prompts Sassoon to ask the question: "...when was Wiltshire more insane/ Than now...?" The pessimism of this poem is repeated in On Edington Hill which also employs the contrast between Alfred and the aeroplane. Sassoon asserts that we ~~are~~

May all be Alfreds, bombed to bits  
In conflict with a creed of crime.

In A View of Old Exeter a man and his wife in the Victorian painter's scene, drive out in their gig

complacently unknowing  
Of their great-grand child's air-raid-worried mind.

In Antiquities historical monuments, like the trunk and legs



of Ozymandias, only serve "to tell/ Humanity its transience." Humanity is transient; but not the whole of life. Sassoon returns in several poems to the major preoccupation of his religious verse: the permanence of the life of the spirit. Wealth of Awareness re-emphasises the peace of mind that can be derived from nature which in turn suggests unities of experience and memory to the mind. Standing in the garden on a summer night Sassoon is "alone with lifetime". At moments like these, he attempts to define the significance of his life:

I know that life is in my saturate sense  
Of growth and memories of what lifetime meant.  
I am yet young with my unheard unspent  
Awareness of slow-stored intransience.

The perception of this state of affairs is the bond of humanity:

I feel what all have felt and know what none can say.

The gift of knowing the ineffable diminishes as one becomes more aware of its existence and its value; consequently happiness also diminishes to become a poignant calmness. In Acceptance Sassoon tells how happiness "recedes" as it is "taken away by time". This poem is divided into two parts: three lines of question and four of answer which lead to the assertion that happiness is not taken away by "anger or indifference but gratefully "given back like breath" to whence it came. Thus "the heart" is strengthened rather than diminished. These new perceptions of "the heart" parallel the development of "the soul". In Heart and Soul Sassoon defines the complementary unity of these two conceptions in the body. As age comes, "the heart" does not grow "colder" but able to see more clearly as "the soul grows stronger". The destination of "the heart" is "the grave" although "the soul" has not yet run its "race". That "the heart" and "the soul" inhabit the same body is paradoxical:

Soul undaunted and heart death-haunted

Dwell together, estranged yet one.

(Starlight lonely and firelit room)

The "heart" and "soul" are neatly imaged in parenthesis but the total effect of this two-stanza poem is marred in the second stanza by archaic diction and the unfortunate image of the "soul" girding up its loins:

Heart be brave as you go to your grave;

Soul be girt for the race unrun.

(Holpen both by ghosts from the gloom)

Happiness is again involved in Tragitones. In two four-line stanzas Sassoon hints that the process of discovering tranquility in life is not totally conscious and that it is fostered by "ghosts" or presences by which Sassoon is perpetually haunted; by these he has been led "away from life":

I have not sought these quietened cadences,

These tragitones, these stilled interior themes.

In the second stanza Sassoon states that his "faith" provides comfort; it "perceives/ No foot-print where felicity has gone."

The poems in Rhymed Ruminations concerned with Sassoon's son reveal the extent of this "faith" which is, as yet, unformulated. The advice he gives his child is limited to vague universal concepts. In To My Son he instructs the child to be "gay", "wise", "strong" and "brave", and to "possess" his "soul". Between each instruction "Go and be..." is a line of nearly three times the length explaining the necessity of each attribute. Collectively, these wise counsels are amazingly unremarkable. The child is more important as the object of Sassoon's emotions showing the essential self-centredness of Sassoon's approach to life. The child also enables him to examine death from a different angle, that of its significance between the generations. In the child there is a hint of immortality: In Meeting and Parting Sassoon addresses "My self reborn". Sassoon hopes for forgiveness from a child who is "doomed to live", a hope fostered by the apparent vulnerability of the child. In The Child at

the Window the father hopes to be remembered by the child, and that the child will heed his simple advice. Progressions is the poem most central to Sassoon's scheme of ideas: the "lovely child alone" reminds him of his own journey from idyllic childhood through "impassioned", ignorant youth to disillusioned age that together have produced the intellect so plainly figured in the poems:

A mind, matured in wearying bones, returning slowly  
Toward years revisioned richly while fruitions fail him,-  
A mind, renouncing hopes and finding lost loves holy.

#### Footnotes to Chapter Six

- 1) At the Sign of the Fish (Collins, London, 1960) p.20
- 2) Times Literary Supplement, December 1933.
- 3) *ibid.*

## Chapter Seven

### POEMS OF THE FIFTIES

Common Chords, published in 1950, was the first volume of Sassoon's poetry to appear for ten years and it contains only eighteen poems. Compared with the amount of poetry that Sassoon had produced in earlier years, this output seems slight. He had occupied himself during the forties with writing his secondary autobiographies; The Old Century, published in 1938 was followed by The Weald of Youth and Siegfried's Journey in which Sassoon returns with undisguised nostalgia to his childhood and then his public success as a poet in the years immediately following the war. He also wrote a work of critical biography on Meredith an author whom he had loved since his childhood. (1) During the forties, however, several volumes of selected poems and the first Collected Poems (1947) appeared. That he wrote little and that he permitted his collected works to be published, indicate that Sassoon had no significant development of his religious or emotional life to record.

The three opening poems in Common Chords - <sup>Release</sup>~~Release~~, The Unproven and Euphrasy - reveal something of the tone of the ensuing volume; Each is composed of two stanzas containing four alternately rhyming lines and each states succinctly some aspect of Sassoon's position as a non-intellectual thinker. Collectively, they re-affirm some of the basic assumptions that had guided him in his search for spiritual self-knowledge. The brevity of these poems achieves a sense of irony that is sometimes laboured in other poems in this volume; there is also a sense of carping obstinacy in the face of possible alternative standpoints. Release concerns Sassoon's unsuccessful attempts to understand contemporary developments in thought "forecasting human fate" and written by "undelighting moderns". "Modern" as a term of abuse invariably rebounds

on its user who conversely must be "old-fashioned". The intellectual activity of these "moderns" is imaged in Winter, the season in which it is undertaken, and it is made to seem hollow and futile, its value contradicted by the arrival of Spring. The "first real day of Spring", representing "delight", arrives in "its old unintellectual way". The simplicity of this season and the permanence of the cycle are intended to make the mental gymnastics of "the undelighting moderns" seem ephemeral.

In The Unproven Sassoon states that science obscures the simple truths of life, symbolised by angels in the poem. These "un-believed-in angels" ask each other when science will "overhear" them and "encourage/ Their ministries to men." Euphrasy, like Release, takes the beginning of Spring for its symbolic setting and uses it to attack the idea that ageing is a constant process unaffected by the regenerative cycle of the seasons. Thus Sassoon's "sense of the present" is equated with "a tale untold". Sassoon is aware that it is his own mind that imbues the processes of nature with significance. In the rather self-conscious poem The Message he rephrases Coleridge's "And in our life alone does nature live". Riding homeward on a November day, Sassoon sees the sky

Transfigured as by ben~~ef~~eficence fulfilled.  
Thus Nature's countenance. The thought was merely mine.

But Sassoon is not satisfied with this assumption; he feels obliged to suggest the possibility that the scene is some sort of divine revelation:

Cloud streaks and shoals, like silver wings outspread,  
Spanned serenities of blue,  
As though, enharmonised with life below,  
Some heavenly-minded message had been said.  
Thus, child-like, I imagined. Yet it might be true.

The use of alliteration, of words like "serenities" and "enharmonised" and of the well-modulated lines suggest the peace of the scene; yet the only "message that the reader can div~~ine~~<sup>ine</sup> is that the varying aspects

of nature, such as the sky, lend themselves to analogy.

As a nature poet, Sassoon is more successful when he re-affirms his basic premise that nature provides "tranquility." In An Example this special balm is consciously sought; a cole-tit so absorbs the poet's "unquiet mind" that the fluttering bird calms and soothes him. Although the bird is merely a "small...thing", it is "purposed" and this is its example. The tight verse scheme with its short six-syllable lines, reinforces the sense of the simplicity of the lesson. In <sup>A 1940 memory</sup> ~~another poem~~ a small creature arouses very different feelings in the poet showing that although the bird in An Example is "purposed" it has no purpose for the poet, just as the sky in The Message is not apocalyptic. Much as Sassoon would like to see divine inspiration at work, he prefers to accept moments of calmness, close to nature and unquestioning. When his "inner self" is in tune with nature, he experiences profound emotion; nonetheless, in A 1940 memory the "Clouded Yellow butterfly" serves to revive Sassoon's distress at "the war's worst troubles." The butterfly, seen when Sassoon was suffering "appalled and personal throes", has become emblematic of that painful experience:

Yet, every walk I pass that way,  
A sunless mid-September day  
Will faithfully recur, and I  
Stalk that slow loitering butterfly.

Pleasant encounters with nature provide consolation in a world without mercy. In An Absentee the "absentee" is "mercy" and the poem is an account of the absence of mercy in the world's affairs. The short couplets suggest Blake, but the language does not achieve Blake's tautness. Superficially the poem captures the mood of The Road to Ruin, but its banal conclusion precludes serious judgement:

No nation, in its need,  
Mercy's name must heed.  
No statesman dare suggest  
Methods by mercy blessed.

Most minds decide today  
That mercy does not pay.

Although he observes that "mercy" is conspicuously absent from contemporary affairs of state, Sassoon is quite willing to leave the solution of the problem of avoiding nuclear holocaust to what he vaguely terms "Congresses." His claim in Elsewhere that a man must look "elsewhere" for the "appeasement of his tortured mind" because "nothing that one man can think or say/ Could prove effective in the feeblest way..." reflects his life since the late twenties and totally contradicts his individual stand against authority in 1917. To support the cynical contention that the individual can opt out of responsibility for the mass, Sassoon insists that

The indestructible exists  
Beyond found formulas of scientists.  
Our spiritual situation stood the same  
In other epochs when  
To thwart all ministries of mercy came  
The arrogant ineptness of men.

The "indestructible" is presumably some guiding power in the universe rather than mere matter. The passage as a whole is indicative of Sassoon's desire to convince himself of the justification and efficacy of a personal escape-route. In Time of Decivilisation, echoing Hardy yet without Hardy's quiet conviction, makes a similar point; again Sassoon presents himself as a man with a tortured mind seeking only tranquility:

Stillness, man's final friend,  
Absolve this turmoiled thought  
Of ills I cannot mend  
That so my brain be brought  
An unimpassioned pride  
Where perfidies prevail,  
And - old beliefs belied -  
Philosophy to fail.

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This passage typifies Sassoon's attitude to contemporary affairs; in looking "elsewhere" for "appeasement" of his "tortured mind", he makes this activity itself a virtue and the proper pursuit of poetry. The use of the word "absolve" in its perjorative sense - to mean "set aside" - indicates the extent of Sassoon's desire to create a religious sanctuary in which to flee a world where "perfidies prevail." The state of mind he desires is one of "pride" (i.e. self-respect) but not involving the deadly sin; this "pride must therefore be "unimpassioned." The parenthetical "old beliefs" refer not to established religious faiths but to Sassoon's own former beliefs, probably in the spheres of social and political reform; for it was to be in the Catholic Church that Sassoon finally discovered the "philosophy" that would allow him to "fail", the philosophy to give him the strength to accept his personal failure, the betrayal of his youthful hopes and ideals.

Looking for a philosophy of "failure" Sassoon seeks an answer in God. Although the poems already discussed in this and former volumes, show Sassoon's faith in transcendent values, he has not yet formulated a consistent opinion of God. He refers occasionally to the "Creator", the "Maker" and to God as an entity separate from the world, yet his theological quest tends to raise questions which seem unanswerable. In the vigorous questioning of AN Asking Sassoon asks the "Primordial Cause" which pre-historic man first discovered that he had a "soul." In Resurrection he wonders what form this detachable "soul" will take. Here he directs his questioning at himself rather than at God - are the deficiencies in his faith his own fault? In Praise Persistent Sassoon accepts the Christian doctrine of continuous praise and the object of this praise is the "Maker" but raises a doubt at the end of the poem concerning the human conception of the divine:

Thus, praise persistent, year beyond wrought year,  
Those paeans rise and fade and disappear -  
Held to what infinite heart - heard by what immanent ear?

These poems on religious themes also show Sassoon's debt to Henry Vaughan. Few direct parallels are traceable between the poets;



rather there exists an affinity of temperament between them and this is nowhere more remarkable than in Redemption. Like Vaughan in the Silex Scintillans poems, Sassoon has chosen a religious subject and dealt with it in a personal way. Although Vaughan has been accused of plagiarising Herbert's work - a debt he never sought to obscure - his poetry is conspicuously lacking in "wit." His influence on Sassoon can therefore be said to be greater than Herbert's since, in company with Vaughan, Sassoon prefers muted tones and a retired mood to express the experience of religious feeling. Sassoon was only a partially convinced Christian; Redemption expresses the crucial need for revelation experienced by half-believers. In the first stanza Sassoon recognises that man's concept of the redemption of souls is contained in his own temporal thinking - "the abysm of ages." In the second stanza he regrets his own inability to visualise "the Invisible" and that he cannot receive information from "that world beyond" sensory perception. These are thoughts of the past; in the third and concluding stanza, Sassoon changes the tense to the present:

I think; if through some chink in me could shine  
But once - O but one ray  
From that all-hallowing and eternal day,  
Asking no more of Heaven I would go hence.

Emblems of Experience published in 1951, draws on poems written about the same time as those published a year earlier in Common Chords. There is naturally no marked change of mood although Sassoon has indicated his criteria of selection in the titles of the two volumes. Emblems of Experience is almost entirely composed of personal poems concerning Sassoon's private existence; Common Chords contains more poems concerned with the poet's reaction to external events and more poems on generalised devotional themes.

The opening poems of Emblems of Experience, the sonnet A Prayer to Time conforms to Sassoon's principle of "visualisation". "Time" manifests itself in the visually more striking aspects of the universe. Among other things "Time" is "unexplored elysium", "Death-

shadowed pyramid", "Ambition's road; Lethe's awaited guest." "Time" is an important factor in Sassoon's world; it is involved with the process of ageing, yet paradoxically also obscures man's destiny. In Emblems of Experience this pre-occupation with time leads to the re-introduction of morbid ideas and the ghosts of earlier volumes (which were noticeably absent from the lighter and more contented atmosphere of Common Chords). In Solitudes at Sixty, ghosts find space in "solitudes" which are "stagnant, motiveless and slow." "Old friends arrive" but they have become meaningless; the memory of them is a habit:

Known by heart,  
Finite impersonations, learnt by ear,  
Their voices talk in character and depart.

His friends are dead; they cannot be recalled by any "supernatural agency." Their absence emphasises the fact for Sassoon that he is an old man whose age is his only concern:

Meanwhile myself sits with myself agreeing  
That to be sixty is no easy thing.

The first line of Solitudes at Sixty - "Sexagenarian solitudes I find.." - seems pedantic. Ultimate Values, a poem with a similar theme begins more strikingly; the play on words is emphasised by the neat position of the caesura:

The hour grows late, and I outlive my friends.

To outlive one's friends necessitates their reinvention; the "memoried mind" can only be consoled by "hoarded time, enriched and redesigned." Sassoon is stating here that general truths may be observed in his own experience and of this experience the most disturbing memories are the spoken wisdoms of those friends, recalled a long time after those who spoke them are dead:

Those word-illumined moments, seen and said,  
 Those wisdoms, mortalised beyond the years  
 By simplest human utterance of the dead.

Nostalgia and melancholy seem always to lie at the boundary of Sassoon's world; yet they are impermanent moods which nature can avert. In Early March Sassoon is drawn by the mild Spring weather to walk in farming country. The air and scenery work their charm and dispel thoughts of the past:

Beguilements (which my middle-age can't yet dispel)  
 Steal into me. Rejuvenescence works its charm.  
 Designlessly in love with life unlived, I go...

This poem is written in the familiar twelve syllable rhyming iambic lines. In the almost identically patterned On Scratchbury Camp Sassoon is riding through the warm June countryside. Scratchbury Camp, the old fortification is now an R.A.F. aerodrome. The droning planes contrast with the summer scene. These obtrusive symbols of destruction - "war's imperious wing" - are not like the free-floating clouds which are "uncircumstanced" nor like the bird that uses air-currents to assist its aerobatics:

I walk the fosse, once manned by bronze and flint-head spear  
 On war's imperious wing the shafted sun-ray gleams:  
 One with the warm sweet air of summer stoops the bird.

Sassoon does not overstate his case; the contrast is defined almost solely in terms of the scene, the clouds and birds; only once does the drone of a fighter-squadron drown the lark whose song is in praise of "freedom."

Other poems in this volume consider the problem posed in Wren and Man: "What does it mean to call oneself a man...?" This particular poem is merely an assertion of the value of humility, but in A Fallodon Memory and A Proprietor Sassoon considers two solitary figures and their relation to nature and history. Watching Edward Gray standing in a wood that he planted many years ago, Sassoon imagines him "Absorbed in some

Wordsworthian slow self-communing." The clue to the man's life, and by inference, to all men's lives, lies in the man's "strength of spirit" and in the relation of that spirit to nature. This man is "Near to all Nature; and in that nearness somehow strange." The subject of A Proprietor, possibly the same man, is smaller in stature; this is reflected in the style of the poem. In A Fallodon Memory the lines increase in length as the poem undertakes weightier philosophical thoughts; in A Proprietor the lines are shorter and vary between six and ten syllables, giving the poem a lighter effect. Furthermore "the green track he treads" puts the proprietor in perspective. He is a "meditative man" who can wonder

what manner of men  
Will walk there in the problem'd future when  
Those trees he planted are long fallen or felled.

A neat antithesis to these ponderings is provided by the "white wild violet" held in the man's hand which, though fragile and delicate, may well be held by other hands when no "memory of him lingers."

In the religious and contemplative poems that were published in successive volumes beginning with The Heart's Journey, Sassoon pursued a poetic method that could only lead to an austerity of style. The search for a refined spiritual truth, expressed in poetry, led him to prefer a poetry that dispensed as far as possible with strictly unnecessary poetic devices. In The Tasking he further subdues his afflatus in an attempt more closely to define his spiritual rationalisations. The title poem illustrates this:

To find rewards of mind with inward ear  
Through silent hours of seeking;  
To put world sounds behind and hope to hear  
Instructed spirit speaking:

Sometimes to catch a clue from self-hood's essence  
And ever that revelation to be asking;  
This - and through darkness to divine God's presence -

I take to be my tasking.

In this poem ~~reads like a rhyming prayer where~~ the poetic form is secondary to the content, if relevant at all; the metaphor of the "inward ear" is apt but not memorable; similarly the "darkness" that obscures "God's presence" is no more than a convenient figure of speech. Sassoon has stated ~~that~~ the task that he has set himself and indicates the scope of his poems.

In this volume it is "the instructed spirit" that speaks. Many of the poems resolve doubts and answer questions that have been expressed and posed in previous volumes; others express "truths" that have been learnt during Sassoon's spiritual search. "God's presence", however obscure, is affirmed in The Tasking, although the need for revelation remains. In The Making God is asserted as a beneficent being and the Creator; "He can forgive" a man who is suffering from original sin, who is

Flawed with inherited humanity,  
And fooled by imperfections wrought through race.

"Humanity" is "inherited" through the body; Human Bondage recognises that the flesh is essentially a "prison" that prevents the soul from aspiring to full spiritual knowledge:

I, this blithe structure of sensation,  
Prisoned and impassioned by my clay.

✻

It follows from this, in Faith Unfaithful, that dying is the summation of God's will; being "carnal", God's creatures can only die to fulfil His commands:

Carnal, I can claim  
Only his known name.  
Dying can but be  
One with him in me.

The abrupt lines and short four-line stanzas give this poem a certain

gnomic simplicity; the sense of total statement supports the idea that before death, God is "ungranted", known only by name.

The blind, dumb faith expressed in Faith Unfaithful is not shaken by the voice of the devil in The Contention, which suggests

"No spirit - none -

'Within your deathward being dwells;

'The will of darkness must be done.

The "will of darkness" is averted by faith and the voice of God speaks clearly; this voice is not revelatory and is known paradoxically through Faith of which the poem is a massive assertion:

I knew, unknowing; I heard, unhearing,

A voice beyond my bodily boding,

'The faithful found me without fearing..'

Praise of Faith and "the spirit" implies denigration of "the flesh" and the poem The Alliance pursues this idea. To resolve the intellectual difficulty and to avoid the sin of spiritual pride, Sassoon writes the poem as an ironical debate between the "spirit" and Montaigne. The "spirit" boasts of its mission in life and upbraids the body for being "the abode of appetites." Montaigne's voice ironically rebukes the "soul" for its presumption:

'Of body and soul there can be no division;

'Soul should embrace it, cherish and control.

'Our two great halves must share a single vision.

The problematic search for "selfhood's essence" proves to have been resolved in an unexpected manner; a new contentment seems to inhabit Sassoon which is reflected in the lightened tone of many of the poems. In The Visitant this is imaged in terms of a stranger occupying the poet's chair, writing new verses, a stranger with new insights to be expressed in verse with a new purposeful clarity:

Someone else invades me for an hour or two  
 Clocked occluded self wrote never lines like his.  
 Me he has no need of. And I know not who  
 Or from what irrational inwardness he is.

Many of the poems in The Tasking possess a new quality of directness and certainty, as if a new, less tentative voice was speaking. The Question begins with the bold question: "Who am I then?" Other poems are bold in their assertions. An Epitome instructs the man who is "just thinking" brusquely: "Accept your soul/ Be evermore alone." Sic Sedebat is a piece of mental self-upbraiding:

Little enough you've learnt  
 While being within you burnt...

The precision of the language in many of the poems, the confident tone and stern apostrophes indicate conviction; Sassoon's search for some insight into his existence and spiritual structure has led to these more dogmatic assertions of conventional Christian doctrine. In The Trial Sassoon admits that he was

Zealous to walk the way of Henry Vaughan  
 Who glimpsed divinity in speechless things...

and he wonders how his "faithful pilgrimage" has survived in "an unbelieving age." He finds that science has obscured "the way of Henry Vaughan." The heavens seem less mystical because science has disclosed various facts about the stars. Sassoon finds it difficult to believe that the God he describes as beneficent, "justifies fang, swamp and claw" He concludes that faith must "endure its trial" even though

Nature and knowledge daunt with dire denial  
 The inward witness...

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In other poems the new confidant voice seems to be the product of spiritual compromise just as the assertion of "faith" is the result of intellectual compromise. In Renewals the "fitful mind" is stilled, so that the "unquesting heart" may enlarge itself through love. In The Humbled Heart, that organ recognises its own limitations and that its function is to house the soul which may or may not provide revelation:

Bring what news you can  
Stranger, loved of body's humbled heart.  
Say one whispered word to mortal man  
From that peace whereof he claims you part.

Sid Sedebat shows how little one can expect of possible revelations, the need for which has been constantly expressed in Sassoon's poems. Now, while castigating himself for his deficiency in knowledge gained from life, he realises that his "divination is dumb." However, the concluding poem of The Tasking describes in twelve alternately rhymed lines, Sassoon's final acceptance of "grace" which is peace, the reward of faith. Typically he uses the musical image of "a chord" which vibrates through him "Toward harmony unheard." The poem suggests the final resolution of his spiritual search for abiding "peace of heart":

But in me yet abode  
The given grace though gone;  
The love, the lifted load,  
The answered orison.

Sassoon was received into the Roman Catholic church in 1957 and in a sense, this concluded his search for "self-hood's essence." In 1958 he published two more poems under the titles Lenten Illumin- and Sight Sufficient. Lenten Illuminations compares Sassoon's old "unconvert self" with his present state of grace. It is written in a rambling inconsequential way resembling the conversational manner of the earlier Satirical Poems and indulges Sassoon's taste for coined words to the full. The interior of a church provides him with the



symbolic setting for his new found "child-minded calm." Sight Sufficient describes his quiet faith which needs no apocalyptic spectacle to sustain it.

A small pamphlet of recent devotional poems was published to mark Sassoon's eightieth birthday in 1966, the year of his death, but these add little to the body of his work. The Path to Peace, printed in 1960, is a selection of poetry ranging from as early as 1909 and including four hitherto unpublished poems. In the proposal issued by the Stanbrook Abbey Press to advertise The Path to Peace, the writer comments:

...Although observing no chronological order, a designed sequence traces his spiritual pilgrimage from the somewhat dreamy pantheism of youth through long years of lonely seeking to "life breathed afresh" in acceptance of the gift of faith.

His conversion brought Sassoon's metaphysical speculations to an end and concluded what would have been the life of a minor devotional poet had the First World War not intervened.

#### Footnote to Chapter Seven


- 1) Meredith (Constable, London, 1948)

## Chapter Eight

### CONCLUSION

Siegfried Sassoon was born into a world that was destroyed by the First World War and, in a sense, the pattern of his work reflects social change. Until the war he lived in an idyllic, remote, rural county where the gentlemanly occupations of cricket and hunting seemed to be the most important activities. Even his stay at Cambridge did not broaden Sassoon's outlook, for students were drawn from broadly his own class. In his thinly disguised autobiography, Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man, Sassoon injects the charming pastoral countryside and rather idealised account of life in rural Kent with a sense of loss, a consciousness that this Edwardian era could never return. His early poetry, stifled by the conventions of 'poetic' diction and romantic notions of truth and beauty harmonising in the forms of nature, would never have achieved recognition; his more ambitious works - The Old Huntsman and The Daffodil Murderer give only the smallest, retrospective glimpse of the direction that his poetic talents were to take.

The rather startling difference between Sassoon's early nature poetry and his war poetry has been explained. Joseph Cohen (1) observes three separate roles in Siegfried Sassoon - prophet, satirist and <sup>hermit</sup> ~~hermit~~ and explains these in terms of Sassoon's ancestry, rather than the environmental pressures placed on him during his life. This explanation is the natural descendant of the myth-making appraisal of Sassoon's character given by Robert Nichols. (2) Joining the army in "the spirit of 1914", the naturally conservative Sassoon felt that he was helping to preserve the English way of life. The exigencies of war were traumatic to a young man who had led the sheltered existence of the privileged Edwardian family. The myths that sustained that class were exploded by the naked struggle exposed by the First World War. Men stripped of

dignity and grace had still to suffer the antagonisms of class. Pushed to the extremes of their power and endurance, they achieved a sort of blind heroism which drove Sassoon, through his own natural sensitivity and compassion to take their part. As his knowledge of politics and his own experience of fighting increased, Sassoon changed his style and purpose. Whereas at the age of twenty-seven he had doubted whether it was justifiable to dedicate one's life and energies to the writing of poetry, now he found new impetus and direction. As this process was slow, the progress of Sassoon's poetic development reflects his changing attitude. Gradually his conventionally heroic poems, written in the manner of Rupert Brooke, are replaced by descriptive pieces which lead on to his "most <sup>forceful</sup> ~~and~~ means of expression" , the short satirical poem. Not since Byron had a poet written more fiercely satirical poetry; yet Sassoon's preoccupation with the actual horrors of fighting are more immediate than Byron's.

The impact of war on Sassoon's sensitive mind drove him not only to frenzied poetic activity, with its corollary of stripping his verses of unnecessary poetic language and writing blunt, rough-made poems, but also to attempt to affect public opinion with A Soldier's Declaration. Sassoon was at no time a pacifist; he did not oppose the continuation of the war in 1917 on grounds of conscience, but because he believed that it was being unnecessarily prolonged for reasons of Empire and that, if a negotiated settlement were possible, it should be undertaken to release the soldiers from their suffering. Unable to sustain his protest in hospital, Sassoon returned to active service.

The effect of Sassoon's war poems is undeniable. Collected together in 1919 in the "tract against war" (3) these poems have some elements of poetry and some of propaganda and have been attacked on these grounds. Yet there is no well-established reason why the two are incompatible and undue emphasis has been placed on the propaganda element. These poems were a reaction against modern warfare which had never before been experienced. The sense of motive and roughness in them is appropriate to their content; here poetry is linked with purpose in a strictly modern way even though Sassoon employs traditional

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metre and rhyme. It is the content of the war-poems, the attitude to the war and to the business of writing poetry that makes them, in the words of Charles Causley, "gutsy and modern." It is evident from Sassoon's early poems, which he wrote consistently from childhood until he was nearly thirty that, had the war not intervened, he would never have achieved more than the most minor Georgian poet.

Sassoon did in fact realise the shortcomings of the Georgian movement. Although he had been pleased to see some of the more lyrical poems of The Old Huntsman included in the 1915/16 edition of Georgian Poetry, he declined the invitation to contribute to later volumes. Certainly in the early twenties his reputation as a war poet was assured and he was at this time possibly one of the most widely-read young poets. yet the end of the war divorced Sassoon from his inspiration and as a satirist (which he saw as his most fitting role immediately after the war) he was doomed. His Satirical Poems remain, emasculated by a diffident, self-effacing approach. At this time, too, his political idealism began to falter. Though sympathetic to the Social Revolution, his views were not informed by the strict Marxist analysis of Auden and Spender and he turned for consolation to the solitary contemplation of his own mind, in a religious sense.

It is difficult to evaluate the religious poems. They evidently spring from and fail to satisfy a deep spiritual need, yet a need which is not sufficiently universal for the poems to have a wide appeal. In devoting the remainder of his career to spiritual self-analysis Sassoon finally rejected the mainstream of modern poetry and, from his Wiltshire backwater, wrote personal poems and published reluctantly.

Sassoon's reputation rests on what Graves called "the extraordinary five years of Siegfried Sassoon's efflorescence (1917-21)" (4). Poetically, Sassoon really only flowered in the two years 1917 and 1918. The poems written at this time, criticism of which is inevitably linked with contemporary events, spring from a psyche disordered by external pressures. The main themes of the bulk of Sassoon's work extend from his juvenilia to the poems written in old age. It is plain that the impact of war alone temporarily turned Sassoon from a Georgian

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versifier into a modern poet of stature. After the war Sassoon devoted his talents to mild devotional poetry, partly as therapy but mostly because this alone suited his temperament.

#### Footnotes to Chapter Eight

- 1) The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon.
- 2) see p. 95.
- 3) Geoffrey Keynes A Bibliography of Siegfried Sassoon (Hart-Davis, London, 1962) p.53.
- 4) Clark Lectures ~~at Cambridge~~ (1954-5) (Hart-Davis, London, 1956)

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